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HE HAD THROWN ONE LEG OVER THE SILL WHEN KIT LEAPED PLUCKILY UPON HIM.

Nick, the Boy Sport;

OR,

THREE PLUCKY PARDS.

BY MAJOR E. L. ST. VRAIN,

AUTHOR OF "THE BOY CHIEF OF ROCKY PASS,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A DARK DEED AT NIGHT.

LEADVILLE, the golden city of the plains, was in a state which her citizens would describe as "quiet." In other words, the hour was past midnight and all honest people were in bed; the only audible sounds arose from the dance-houses and saloons, or from some miner, homeward bound at last, who was easing off his unnatural joy with drunken howls.

In a small shanty that stood somewhat back from any traveled way, three persons sat together, smoking, and now and then making some remark, but it was worthy of notice that they burned no light.

All seemed to be uneasy, and, finally, one of the three arose, went to the door and looked out.

"What's the use o' hangin' round hyar?" he growled, as he turned back. "Ther hull durned town is either asleep or drunk an' I want ter git this business off'm my hands an' ketch a leetle sleep afore mornin'."

"Don't be impatient, Rufe," said one of his companions, in a soft voice which contrasted oddly with the rougher one. "We want to make sure, you know, so that we won't have any one howling around our heels to-morrow."

"Et won't be ther fu'st time, ef they do howl," growled Rufe. "I've see'd a bit o' life—"

"Never mind your biographical items! if you were a patriot or a philanthropist, they might be entertaining; as it is, the less you say the better."

"I reckon my record is ez white as yourn, Dave Sargent," retorted Rufe.

"Bah! why will you quarrel? Let us have peace. But, what of our young friend? Nicholas, you are very silent."

"I've nothing to say," answered the third person, somewhat meekly.

"He's like me, he is," said Rufe. "He is a man o' deeds, rayther than o' words. Ain't I right, Nick?"

"Whether I am or not you are resolved to make me one," was the quick retort. "All I have to do is to follow your lead and I shall become a first-class cut-throat."

"My dear Nicholas—" began Sargent, in his oily way; but the person addressed abruptly arose and stopped him with a gesture.

"We are wasting words," he said, curtly. "Be satisfied if I become a cut-throat under your tuition, and don't try to smooth the matter over. You reached out your hand and pulled me out of a scrape, and for that I have agreed to follow your lead. Let that suffice. To-night we are to play the burglar. Good! let us get to

work; I am tired of sitting here like owls on a tree."

Despite the darkness, it was plain that the last speaker lacked the years of the other two. His form, gestures and words were those of a young man, perhaps a mere boy, but at the same time it was evident that he possessed an intelligence and resolution superior to that of his companions.

Sargent sighed heavily as Nick ceased speaking, as though the words he had heard grieved him deeply; nevertheless, he arose to his feet.

"Perhaps you are right," he said, "and we will now walk over to the hotel and see if all is dark and silent there."

Rufe growled his pleasure, in his usual abrupt way, and the trio left the shanty and moved away in the darkness with Sargent at their heads.

Despite the fact that so few people were astir, the three moved with a secret, skulking way which, coupled with the words they had spoken, showed that they had some unlawful object in view.

Seen more plainly under the night sky, it was evident that Rufe was a big, burly ruffian of middle age, a typical "tough," and David Sargent a man of about the same age, but one of those smooth-spoken, crafty fellows who will smile on a man even while planning his ruin.

Nicholas, on the contrary, was a beardless youth. He had not reached his twentieth year, but his form and face were strong and impressive and his manner bold without being swaggering.

We shall see them all in a better light, anon, where their peculiarities will be more marked.

After walking in the secret way before mentioned for ten minutes, they approached the Eagle Hotel, which at that time was one of the leading public houses of Leadville.

The building was silent, and, with the exception of a faint light from the saloon, without light. Patronage had ceased for the night, and if any one was in the saloon, it was probably the landlord counting his gains.

The prowlers approached the rear of the hotel. It was a long, two-storied building, without ornament, but David approached one window without hesitation.

"This is the place," he said, softly. "Are you ready, Nicholas?"

"Yes; show me the work and I am there."

The words were uttered in a tone like that of a man who has nerved himself to a disagreeable task.

David opened his coat and took out the three masks, and their faces were soon covered. Nick's hair was long, but he gathered it up inside his hat and his disguise was perfect.

Rufe had dropped something on the ground, but David now lifted it and handed a rope-ladder to Nick.

"You see the hooks on the end," he blandly said. "It will be very easy to secure it to the window."

Nick nodded and then advanced to the building without a word.

At that point a rough, wooden water spout reached from the eaves to the ground, and grasping it firmly he began to climb.

"The boy is a trump," growled Rufe.

"He will make a great man," said David, gently. "He has skill, nerve and pluck. We are lucky to have such an ally, for neither of us could climb the spout."

"I hev a feelin' that thar will be trouble inside thar."

"So much the better. I'll see that Edward Russell don't see to-morrow."

David spoke as gently as ever, but his words were not to be misunderstood.

Nick was climbing slowly but surely. His task was a hard one, owing to the peculiarities of the spout, but he at last reached the window and adjusted the ladder.

Then David ascended with the agility and silence of a cat, and only a window was between him and the interior of the house. He tried the window, and found it unfastened; a discovery which surprised and pleased him.

His work was thus made a good deal easier.

Rufe remained on the ground as a guard, but it was planned that the other two should enter. Really, Nick's usefulness was supposed to be over; but David wanted him so securely in his net that he would not dare to betray them.

The leader entered the room with a noiselessness remarkable in a man of his size and years, and the youth was soon beside him.

"This is a store-room," said David, "and you may stumble over something if you are not careful. Look out where you step, and follow me."

"Go on!" said Nick, somewhat huskily.

David crossed the room, found a door and opened it a trifle, after which he paused to listen. All remained silent outside, and they passed through into a hall.

The leader was proceeding with the ease of one who knows the way he treads, and he soon paused before a door at the left of the passage. A trial showed him that it was locked, but he had expected as much. For a moment he was busy about the key-hole, and then the bolt slipped back.

Once more he paused, and then, pushing open the door, entered the room, followed by Nick.

All was dark, but heavy breathing at one side told the younger man that a sleeper was there. He was far from being calm. Too brave to be frightened, the nature of the work disgusted and horrified him.

David, however, felt no scruples. He moved forward like a phantom, and Nick, who stood still, soon saw him raise something in his hand which he believed to be the clothing of the sleeper.

Perhaps five minutes passed. David was busy, and from the bed arose that regular breathing. Once or twice Nick was seized with an impulse to shout at the top of his voice but he controlled himself.

At last David seemed satisfied, and he turned back toward the door. Nick breathed freer; the suspense was drawing to an end, he thought. So it was, but not in the way he fancied.

Without the slightest warning the man on the bed bounded to the floor. His feet struck with a peculiarly heavy thump, and, before the intruders could recover from their surprise, he had seized David and his voice was arising in loud shouts:

"Help! help! Thieves! assassins! murder! Help! help!"

These cries, rolling out in the dead silence of night, are sure to arouse every one within hearing and create a great excitement. The intruders knew this and saw their danger.

"Hands off!" hissed David, trying to hurl his assailant aside. "Curse you! let go or I'll kill you!"

Nick recognized the fixed purpose thus viciously expressed, but if the stranger was equally astute he was certainly very brave. Instead of obeying, he tightened his hold and continued his yells.

There could be but one result to all this. Other men were heard bounding from their beds, other voices arose, and a murmur ran through the whole hotel.

Nick stood in terror. He saw, in imagination, himself in the hands of law, arrested for theft, and the thought was an alarming one. He longed to take to flight, but it was against his nature to desert a companion, even in such a case.

He was about to go to David's aid, but the help was not needed. The soft manners of the leader concealed a remorseless heart, and he knew how to act in such an emergency.

Finding his assailant's hold so tenacious, he jerked a knife from his belt and struck out straight and sure. Then the other released his hold, moaned slightly and dropped to the floor.

David turned to his young ally.

"Out of here, quick!" he hissed. "It's a matter of life and death, now!"

Like one in a dream Nick allowed himself to be pushed from the room. He had not seen David's stroke, but he knew the meaning of that heavy fall.

As they reached the hall, a new danger awaited them. A young girl, with flowing hair, a pale face and a dress which showed from its form that it had been hastily donned, emerged from another door and met them face to face.

In her hand she carried a lamp, and as Nick saw that beautiful face he was more than ever impressed. He forgot his danger and gazed like one under a spell.

Luckily, David was less impressed. One sweep of his hand dashed the light to the floor, where it was broken in pieces, and then he seized Nick and dragged him toward the point at which they had entered.

With the return of darkness came the youth's wits, and as he heard the tumult all over the hotel, he settled down to the work of escape.

Those inside would soon seek for a murderer.

CHAPTER II.

AFTER THE TRAGEDY.

No one appeared in the fugitives' way, and once in the store-room, escape was easy. The rope-ladder still hung in its place, and they went down hurriedly, after which David cast off the hooks, and they had nothing to do but to retreat.

Rufe had deserted his post, but this was not strange, considering that the whole hotel was in an uproar. His allies did not look for him, but glided away in the darkness.

Nick, looking back over his shoulders, saw a light streaming from nearly every window, and he knew the search would soon extend beyond the hotel. His stupefaction had vanished, and he was eager for escape; but his blood seemed to have turned to ice.

A murder had been committed in the house, and he was an accomplice.

They had not gone far when Rufe joined them. He desired particulars, but David forbade talking, and they hurried back to the shanty.

Once there, the leader imperiously ordered his allies to go to bed. There must be no more talking in the shanty that night, for it might direct suspicion to them.

David at once took to his couch, and the other two followed his example, but not once during the hours of darkness which followed did Nick sleep. He was in a state of nervousness he had never before felt; he was filled with horror at the recollection of what had occurred, and in imagination he saw himself brought to trial for the crime or handed over to Judge Lynch.

The later possibility was not at all improbable.

Day dawned at last, and the young man arose and applied water freely to his feverish head and face.

He was apparently, about nineteen years of age, and a handsome young fellow. He had a fine form, a clear-cut, bright face, which was unusually firm for one of his years, and the hair, which fell over his neck and upon his shoulders, was jet-black and wavy.

A handsome young fellow he certainly was, but a close observer would have detected signs of recklessness which did not promise any too well for the future.

He looked out of the door, and saw that the miners were just getting in motion for their day's work. Leadville looked as pleasant as though the night had seen no deed of bloodshed.

"Perhaps," thought Nick, brightening suddenly, "it is not so bad, after all. Because the man was struck, it does not prove that he is dead. He may be no more than wounded—but no, no! he fell like a log, uttering only a moan. He was killed, and I—I am an ally of a murderer. Good Heavens! I never expected to come to this!"

He looked fiercely at David, and, as though awakened thereby, the man moved, opened his eyes, and then arose.

"Good-morning, Nicholas—and it's a pleasant morning outside, I see."

The smooth-tongued rascal had never been more at his ease, but his young companion made a gesture of aversion.

"How is it at the Eagle Hotel?" he fiercely asked.

David put out both hands deprecatingly.

"Nicholas! Nicholas! you really must not mention that affair. Walls have ears, you know. Let us bury it."

"Mr. Sargent," said the youth, abruptly, "I have paid the debt I owe you; I have served you faithfully. Now, will you let me go away from Leadville?"

"At this time? Impossible. It would at once direct suspicion to you, and Judge Lynch would be on your track before noon. One cannot be too careful in such a case."

"I shall go mad if I stay here."

David looked very much astonished.

"Why should you? There is nothing to fear—"

"I am not afraid, in one sense of the word, but there is innocent blood on our hands, and I am wretched."

"Now, Nicholas—"

An imperious gesture interrupted the oily-tongued rascal.

"Enough; I yield to your will, for now. Tell me what to do."

"Do just as you have done; be yourself. You have cut quite a swath in this town and men call you the Boy Sport. Somehow, too, they have taken a fancy to call you Leadville Nick, and Leadville Leon, so that plain Nicholas Leon is buried in a shower of soubriquets. As short a time as you have been in town you are better known than Rufe Bonney or myself. Such being the case, you have a character to uphold. If you flee from Leadville, or keep out of sight, men will say, 'The Boy Sport was concerned in the affair at the Eagle.' Thus, you see that you must go on just as you have done."

Nick sat down with a hopeless air.

"I am in the toils!" he muttered.

"Does your courage fail you?" asked David, a slight sneer in his smooth voice.

The youth lifted his head haughtily.

"You shall see," he replied, tersely. "I will do as you wish, but beware how you ask more of me."

David thought it prudent not to answer, but, awakening Rufe Bonney, directed him to prepare breakfast.

Then the chief plotter went to one side, drew several papers from his pocket and began to unfold them. Nick knew that it was for them they had entered the hotel, and he secretly watched.

David looked at the first and started; he looked at the second and seemed troubled; while the third and last brought a subdued curse from his lips. He seemed angry and disappointed, and a sudden suspicion flashed upon Nick. His leader had not obtained what he wished; their crime had been in vain.

His suspicion was confirmed when David went hastily through them a second time, and then, thrusting them in his pocket, stared long and blankly at vacancy. In some way he was disappointed, and Leadville Nick felt a thrill of joy at the thought that the documents might be wholly useless.

Still, David betrayed nothing by word, and he ate quite heartily of the breakfast Rufe prepared.

When the meal was finished, Nick walked over to a saloon near the Eagle Hotel in search of news. He was not obliged to ask any questions; every one was talking of the tragedy; and he had only to sit still and hear them tell how one Thomas Neal had been murdered in his room, stabbed to the heart by an unknown man.

"Neal was a servant of a man named Russell," continued one orator, "and he had Russell's

daughter, Ethel, in his charge. The girl was aroused by Neal's cries and met the murderers in the hall, but her view was brief, and as both were masked she can tell nothing about them."

The last statement caused Nick to breathe freer, but his mind settled down on Ethel Russell. So that was the name of the girl he had seen in the hall. At that time he had been impressed by her beauty, and now he felt a deep pain as he thought how he had aided to deprive her of a protector.

He longed to go to the hotel and see her again, but there seemed to be so much risk about it that he would not make the attempt.

He sat and listened for some time and then returned to the shanty and reported to David. The latter heard in silence until the name of the murdered man was mentioned, and then he arose to his feet.

"Neal!—did you say Neal?" he demanded.

"Yes; Thomas Neal."

"Not Russell!"

The last words were uttered in a tone of consternation, and as though mechanically; and Rufe Bonney, looking at his superior, muttered:

"We might hev spared his life."

The words were a revelation to Leadville Nick, and like a flash came the belief that the murder had been planned in advance. The villainous pair had declared to him, before the expedition, that they only wished to rob a guest at the hotel; but if appearances were not deceptive, they had even then resolved to shed human blood.

Briefly, they wished to murder Ethel Russell's father and rob him of certain papers. What was their reason? What plot was afoot?

At that moment Leadville Nick made a resolution. He would not desert his evil associates; he would hang to them and learn their secret, and when that secret was his, if it proved important, he would betray David and Rufe even though it placed his own neck in a noose.

Keeping his thoughts to himself and controlling his face, he let the others talk, but nothing further was said to aid him.

David soon ceased talking, relapsed into deep thought, and seemed weighing important events in his mind. Finally he arose abruptly.

"I am going," he said, to Nick, "and you had better go, too. As I said before, your absence at this time might arouse suspicion. Show yourself to every one and act as usual. Let the Boy Sport be himself."

There was no occasion for the advice. Nick had thrown off all hesitation, and looked and acted as usual, but it was because he had formed a resolution. Whatever the result might be to himself, he was going to see justice done in the case.

During the day no one was heard to assert that a clue to the assassins had been found. The sheriff had been busy, and amateur detectives were everywhere, but no developments had been made.

It had been easy enough to discover the way in which the assassins had entered, but not even a footprint could be found to give a clue to their identity. Ethel Russell was able to state that one of the men had been large and the

other small, but her description went no further.

This was the report made by David Sargent at supper. Nick, who had not been near the hotel, listened with outward indifference. He hoped the men would say something further to betray themselves, or to give a history of the Russells, but they were on their guard, and he learned nothing.

Just before twilight the Boy Sport sauntered out alone. Sargent had advise him to "make an evening of it," but he really intended to go to the Eagle Hotel and begin his investigations.

He had nearly reached the place when he met a young man of about his own age, and both paused and shook hands.

"Back again, Kit?" said Leadville Nick, evidently much pleased. "I had begun to think you had shaken our dust off to stay."

"Oh! I don't leave Leadville while I have so good a thing here. I'm making money, and if I hang on I'll be able to go East in a year or so and show people that I wasn't crazy to try my luck in Colorado."

"You have a mother and sister in Ohio, I believe you said?"

"Yes; and they can't be excelled. I'd like to take you back when I go, Nick. I've written to them concerning you, and my mother, in her last letter, said: 'Tell your friend to be true and strong of heart, and good luck will come to him.'"

Nicholas Leon started. The words were like thorns in his heart. He had met Kit Allen some time before, and they had become strong friends, and it was because he had contrasted Kit's unquestionable honor and his own guilt that the words were so painful to him.

How little he deserved the kind words from that Ohio mother!

For a moment Leadville Nick hesitated over his reply, but he was saved from making any by an exclamation from Kit.

"Thunderation! here comes Ethel Russell! Where, in the name of all that is wonderful, can she be going at this time of night?"

CHAPTER III.

THE YOUNG CHAMPIONS.

THE words abruptly recalled Nicholas Leon's thoughts, and as he had not forgotten the name of the young girl in whom he had taken such an interest, he looked eagerly in the direction indicated by Kit.

He saw a lady walking rapidly along the opposite side of the street, but she was so closely veiled that he could not have told whether she was old or young had it not been for her form and her light movements.

All these were those of one still young in years, but he could scarcely believe that it was Ethel Russell.

"You must be mistaken, Kit," he said.

"I certainly am not."

"Do you mean the young lady who was left without a protector by the murder at the Eagle Hotel?"

"Yes."

"But are you acquainted with her?"

"I never saw her until this afternoon, but I can swear to her identity. True, she is veiled,

and she has made a change in her dress, but I never forget a person when I look at him or her closely. Come, let us follow her and see if I am not right."

The girl was fast leaving them behind, but they struck into a rapid walk and followed.

"I don't understand it," persisted Nick. "I heard them say she hadn't an acquaintance in Leadville, and here she is going out just at dark, to a place and at an hour when she's more than likely to meet some desperado who will not fail to see her."

"I am as much perplexed as yourself. I only know that she is Ethel Russell, but her present errand is all wrapped in mystery. What can call one so pretty, refined and good as she is out in the streets of Leadville at night?"

Nick Leon, having seen the girl once himself, did not doubt but what these adjectives were rightly applied, but he looked at Kit in additional surprise.

"Are you acquainted with her?" he asked.

"That's twice you have asked me already. I never saw her until this afternoon; but when I heard her story and saw her, I was so filled with pity that I had to express my feelings to her. I also promised to find the murderer."

"What did she say?"

"Very little," said Kit, hesitatingly. "I don't think she had much faith in me; but mark my words, Nick, I'm going to clear up this mystery. I've sworn to try my level best."

"I'm with you," said Nick promptly. "It was a dastardly crime, and we will look the matter up together."

He meant what he said, and his resolution to sacrifice himself, if need be, to punish David Sargent, was still in his mind, but his thoughts were more on the mystery of the papers than anything else.

"Ah! I think she has nearly reached her destination," said Kit. "She looks about from side to side, as though to identify some building and, — Ha! she is turning from the street!"

Kit Allen paused in genuine surprise. The girl had left the street and was hastening toward the shanties which clustered together like bee-hives, and her conduct grew more and more puzzling.

"I believe she is crazy," added Kit. "No sane person—that is, no girl, like her—would risk their lives among that hotbed of toughs."

"You forget she is a stranger in Leadville."

"Yes, and, by George! I believe some one is luring her into a trap. Not content with killing her protector, they want to snare her, also!"

The Boy Sport started. Was his friend right? Was there a plot against the life or happiness of Ethel Russell? It looked very much like it, and he believed he saw the hand of David Sargent in the case.

"Let's hasten forward and warn her," he exclaimed.

"Wait!" advised Kit. "Better follow as we are doing. She may really have a friend there, and our words might be resented. We will follow closely, and if any one attempts to harm her, then we will chip in with our revolvers."

"So be it," said Nick, tersely.

Ethel was now fairly among the shanties, and

as darkness was falling, they pressed forward as near as was discreet and watched keenly. She showed some hesitation, and seemed to understand that the dingy rough cabins marked a lawless locality, but she went on and, by some strange chance, none of those rough fellows who were in the habit of making night hideous about there appeared to molest her.

At last she paused beside one of the shanties, and then the two friends saw a man beside her. From whence had he come? Up to this time she had been alone, but they saw her look at him as though talking, and then he pushed the door open and she entered.

"She has friends, after all," said Kit.

"Don't be too sure of that. I believe she has walked into a trap, as you suggested. We must get a look into that cabin."

The unknown man had followed Ethel into the shanty, and the trailers could follow without danger. They glided quickly forward, and as an occasional gleam of light through a knot-hole directed them, they were not long in gaining a view of the interior of the place.

They looked and saw Ethel and two men. All were standing, but, judging from appearances, she had just refused a stool offered by one of them.

As for the men, they were villainous-looking fellows, true specimens of the "toughs" of the mining districts, and it was evident that she was already troubled by her situation.

"Thank you, but I will not sit down," they heard her say; "I am expected back at the hotel, and I must make haste. Will you please speak at once?"

"You'll 'scuse me, marm," said one of the men, "but I ain't dead sure you be Ethel Russell. Ef you will raise that hyar vail, I shall know for sure."

She hesitated for a moment and then complied with his request. The raising of the vail revealed a face so pretty that the fellow's eyes sparkled, but he managed to regain his composure, and meekly said:

"Et are all right, marm, I see."

"Very well, sir; and now tell me what you know about that affair last night."

"Wal, you see, it is jest hyar. Me'n my pard are tender-hearted chicks what can't see a pritty gal misused, an' we writ' that letter ter git a chance ter give our emotions full play, an' assure you we are knights o' chivalry on a gallop. Our hearts bleed fur you."

"I thank you for your sympathy; but what is the secret you have to tell?"

"That's all, marm. Ter come right down ter bed-rock, we don't know one durned thing about ther case, but we do know you are as pritty a leetle rosebud as ever sprung up in Leadville, an' we are yer devoted slaves!"

Ethel Russell became very pale. She could not fail to read aright the insolent words and looks of this dirty fellow in rags. He was not her friend, he had not sent for her to do her a favor, but she was in a trap.

"Then your letter was a decoy?" she asked, with surprising calmness.

"I suppose it might be called so. At any rate, we never heern o' you afore this mornin', an' don't know nothin' about ther case."

"Then why are you interested?"

"Can't we tell a pritty girl when we see one?"

"Well, if you have nothing to reveal, I will leave at once," starting toward the door; but one of the men sprung into her path.

"No, you won't, my dear!" he sneered. "You will stay hyar with us!"

Quick as a flash the girl drew a revolver from her pocket.

"Out of my way!" she cried, in a ringing voice. "You have not found a helpless victim, and if you attempt to injure me I swear that I will fire!"

The ruffian laughed mockingly.

"Hadn't you better hav a cylinder in yer shootin'-iron afore ye talk too big?" he asked. "How d'ye s'pose this w'u'd fit yer twenty-two caliber?"

He held up a cartridge-filled cylinder as he spoke, and a swift glance showed Ethel that those useful parts of her own revolver had been taken away.

While ushering her into the room, the villain had taken the weapon from her pocket, extracting the cylinder, which was easily moved, and then replaced the skeleton of the revolver.

As Ethel realized all this she grew very pale and the ruffians burst into coarse laughter.

"Ho, ho!" cried one of them; "the claws o' ther tiger-cat am drawn, an' she is helpless. You are right in our power, my beauty!"

The last word had scarcely passed his lips, when the door was burst open with a force which nearly wrenched it clear of its hinges, and Leadville Nick and Kit Allen darted through the door, each holding a revolver.

"Hands up, you dogs!" cried Kit, his blue eyes flashing. "One movement to get a weapon, and out go your back teeth, *sure*."

With a frowning tube menacing each ruffian, the order had a ghastly seriousness which was not to be despised. Though the new-comers were beardless, they had well-developed forms, and their just indignation and wrath were duly impressive.

Up went four hands obediently, though the faces of the men showed bitter wrath, and a momentary tableau was presented.

"You foul dogs!" continued Kit, "I am tempted to shoot you where you stand."

"Better not try it!" one of the two said, with a scowl. "I'm a roarer when I get ter goin', an' you don't want to tackle no sech."

"Bah!" said Leadville Nick. "You can't frighten us with talk. If you hanker for a fight, I'll lay down my revolver, and fight you empty-handed."

"I'm jest your sugar-plum," cried the ruffian. "Let me ketch on onc't, an' Leadville will mourn fur ther Boy Sport."

CHAPTER IV.

A SCIENTIFIC SKULL-CRACKER.

LEADVILLE NICK started at the fellow's last words. It showed that he was well known, and, though there was nothing surprising about this, it awoke unpleasant fears in his mind.

From the time he had first suspected a trap for Ethel Russell, he had wondered if David Sargent's hand was not in the work; and now

it occurred to him that, if such was the fact, the truth would soon be known to the plotter.

How could he manage matters so that Sargent would not know he was working against him?

These thoughts had gone quickly through his mind, even while he half-unconsciously answered that he would hold to his offer; but, at that moment, the fellow suddenly dropped to the floor and lay motionless.

All gazed at him in surprise; even Ethel was so much interested that she forgot that there was at last a chance to go.

Nick Leon, however, suspected a trick.

"Keep your revolver on your man," he said to Kit Allen, "and I'll punch this fellow up."

He advanced, but as he did so the look on the fallen man's face caused him to suddenly pause again. The fallen jaw, the open but glassy eyes, and the strange general expression, were either the signs of death or a wonderfully accurate imitation.

Once more advancing, Nick first felt of the pulse and then the heart of the fallen man. Both had ceased to beat, and beyond a shadow of a doubt, he was done with life.

"Stone-dead!" said the Boy Sport, looking up in wonder.

All were surprised, but it was the remaining ruffian who was the most affected. Sudden death is at all times startling, but when one's chosen companion falls, it strikes a momentary chill to the stoutest heart.

"It's durned quar!" muttered the survivor.

"Heart-disease, beyond a doubt," said Nick.

"Mayn't I go fur a doctor?"

The Boy Sport smiled.

"Not just yet," he said. "You would run in some of your cronies on us and turn the tables. We always hold the lead when we can just as well as not." Then, turning to Ethel: "My dear lady, I beg—"

Nick spoke no further. Without a word, or a step to save himself, the second ruffian dropped beside the first, and then he, too, lay motionless and silent.

"Good Heaven!" cried Ethel, in terror, "what does all this mean?"

"There is a trick," said Kit Allen, decisively. "No two men ever died of heart-disease, or apoplexy, like this. They are shamming."

"The last one may be; the first one is not," said Leadville Nick. "A man may lie silently, and he can drop his lower jaw at will, but he cannot stop the beating of his heart—even if such a thing was desirable. Look to number two and you will find his heart in good working order."

"By Judas! it is not; there is not a throb here!" said Kit, in bewilderment.

Nick knelt by the man and found the same symptoms as with the first. The drooping jaw, the glassy eyes and dull expression—those were there, but the beating of pulse and heart was not.

Like his late companion, the tough was dead; there could be no doubt about it.

"What in the world does it mean?" Kit asked, blankly. "Here are two men, strong, healthy fellows in the prime of life, who sink down without a word and die without a strug-

gle. What caused it? Heart-disease? Nonsense; they were not men to go that way, and even if they were it would be odd if they died so near together."

No one answered. Leadville Nick was thinking of his theory that David Sargent was behind these men, and he was wondering if he had hired them to murder Ethel, and at the same time given them a drug which would operate fatally at the end of a certain time.

As for Ethel, she forgot her situation and the hour; she only remembered what was before her, and the scene exercised an influence over her which was like the fascination of a serpent.

The tableau was abruptly broken, however, as a new-comer marched in at the open door and nodded to them in a genial way.

Both Nick and Kit had started at his entrance, for they feared he was an ally of the dead men, but his manner was far from hostile.

In personal appearance, he had but one peculiarity. He wore the ordinary garments of a miner below his neck, and his bronzed and bearded face carried out the idea that such was his calling, but his hat was a novelty. Possessed of a very narrow rim, the crown arose in the form of a high, slender pyramid, looking odd enough on such a powerfully-built man.

After his nod, he looked at the fallen men.

"Don't waste time on them critters," he said, placidly. "I've laid them out in my scientific way."

"What!" said Nick, "did you have a hand in the work?"

"I opine that I did. I mesmerized 'em an' down they lay. A t'arin' blizzard wouldn't wake 'em up now."

"Explain," said the Boy Sport. "Did you see them fall?"

"I opine I did."

"And do you know what killed them?"

"I laid them out in my scientific way."

"I am still in the dark."

"You do not know me, I see. I'm Siroc, the Skull-Cracker, an' right thar you see my work. Them critters had outlived their usefulness, an' I laid 'em out in my scientific way. Ef you don't believe me, look at the right temple o' each? You'll find a blue spot thar, an' you'll always find one when Siroc gets loose."

The man spoke carelessly, pleasantly, but, impressed in spite of himself, Leadville Nick knelt and made the examination. As had been said, he found the blue spot.

"Do you claim that you killed them?" he asked, in wonder.

Siroc shrugged his shoulders.

"I never say 'killed.' I mesmerized them an' thar they be. When the Skull-Cracker gets loose, thar is an epidemic among ther wicked. Prob'ly you don't know these men. I do. They are thieves, gamblers and murderers. Ef I had time I could name enough murders ter send 'em ter ther gallows; but bein' as how I am always busy, I laid 'em out in my scientific way."

The trio of young people looked at the man in surprise which was not unmixed with awe. Absurd as it appeared, they believed he had killed the two "toughs," but there seemed no

way to explain his method of slaying. He had been outside the door when they fell, and at least six feet away, and none of them had seen a weapon or suspected that the Skull-Cracker was near.

How, then, had he done his work?

Leadville Nick asked the question, but the strange man turned to Ethel.

"Won't you be missed at ther hotel, young lady?" he asked, as pleasantly as ever.

"Yes, yes," she answered, starting. "I must not delay here. I have been absent too long already."

"I reckon these two young men will see you safe thar, an' I'll hobble along in ther rear like a big dog. Ef anybody tries ter merlest ye, I'll lay 'em out in my scientific way."

Ethel looked imploringly at her younger champions. Siroc was pleasant enough, but to her there was something dreadful about a man who killed in such a mysterious way.

"We are all ready," said Kit Allen, interpreting the glance, "and we will see that you suffer no harm, Miss Russell. But what shall be done with these dead men?"

"Leave them thar," said Siroc. "Let other evil-doers know that ther Skull-Cracker is abroad, an' pause afore they git laid out. My advice is that you don't lose any time, but git. I smell smoke."

The last remark was somewhat obscure, but no one asked him to explain it. Both Nick and Kit were suddenly impressed with the importance of at once getting Ethel back to the hotel, and, placing her between them, they left the shanty.

Leadville was just awakening for the night, and as they went, a long-drawn howl arose here and there, and showed that already wit and wine were struggling for the possession of some reckless miner.

Ethel shuddered, but her young champions spoke reassuringly, and the journey was commenced. For a minute or so all forgot Siroc; but after going a few yards, Nick looked around and saw him following at a distance.

He was thoroughly puzzled by the man, but he had more important business on his hands just then, and he soon forgot him.

The adventure of the evening had not decreased the deep impression made upon him when he first saw Ethel Russell. Reading her with excellent judgment, he knew she was as good as she was handsome, and that was saying a good deal. Her eighteen years of life had served to develop her into a young lady who took Nicholas Leon's heart by storm.

In his life the young man had met a good many pretty girls, but never before had he been so touched as by this girl. In the excitement of the occasion, he had forgotten the events which had brought them together—had forgotten that he was a criminal—and he was exerting himself to the utmost to please her.

As a result, she had two very devoted guards on her way, and a few yards in the rear Siroc strolled along, outwardly careless, but watching sharply.

The Eagle Hotel was reached without mishap. The young men had expected to see it in confusion, with every one excited over Ethel's ab-

sence; but the quiet air proved that nothing wrong was suspected, and she bade them adieu at the door and went inside.

She had failed to make any explanation of her situation, or of the decoy letter, but had invited them to call at the hotel the following day, and both had given their promise.

CHAPTER V.

CHUZZLEWIT, THE COWBOY.

THE two friends left the hotel and walked down the street in a thoughtful mood. Not a word was spoken for some minutes, and it was Leadville Leon who finally broke the silence.

"What do you make of this affair, anyway?" he asked.

"Do you mean our adventure?"

"Yes; but more particularly Ethel Russell. What could have been the letter which lured her into that den?"

"Probably the writer promised to tell her who committed the murder."

"In that case it would have been more natural for her to have shown the letter to the sheriff, or some one else, and have enlisted their aid."

"Very likely she is not so world-wise as we are. Girls of eighteen are seldom systematic, and Miss Russell proved her ignorance of the world by walking straight into the worst quarter of the city."

"You may be right, but somehow I feel as though there is a mystery in the matter. Do you remember when you asked her if her father would soon reach Leadville? She hesitated, and only answered that she hoped so, after which she changed the subject abruptly."

"I remember," Kit admitted; "but it may have been chance. I don't see what she can have to conceal. She is no adventuress, and if there is a mystery, it lies beyond her control."

"I believe you!" said Nick, earnestly. "But what of Siroc? We have forgotten him, and I see no sign of him at present."

They paused and looked for the Skull-Cracker, but he was nowhere to be seen. Evidently, he had considered his work done when the hotel was reached, but his mysterious ways had aroused the curiosity of the young pards.

They devoted considerable time to discussing him, but without arriving at any conclusion. Had he really killed the two men in the shanty? There were arguments for and against the claim. They could not understand how he could stand outside the shanty door and kill the toughs at a distance of ten feet so surely and silently. Whatever his weapon, neither of the young men had seen or heard anything of it.

Again there had been a blue mark on the temple of each—or, to speak more comprehensively, that "black-and-blue" sign left after a heavy blow; and it did seem very odd that two strong, healthy men should thus drop side by side without some aid from a slayer's hands.

Discussion made the matter no clearer, so they decided to abandon it for a time and interview Siroc at the first opportunity.

Having arrived at this decision, they bade each other good-night and separated, ostensibly

to go to their homes—but with Leadville Leon this was but a pretense.

He waited until Kit was fairly out of sight, and then turned toward one of the saloons, a place where he had often spent his evenings. On this occasion he had little heart for the work, but he remembered the advice of David Sargent, and resolved to show himself openly.

David had said wisely when he declared that it would not be wise for the Boy Sport to keep out of sight just at that moment.

"It is lucky Kit don't know where I am going, or he might not write back to Ohio about me again. Bah! this life sickens me, and I will get out of it. I would at once leave Leadville, but I am resolved to discover and thwart Sargent's plans. Perhaps—"

His low words ceased, but his thoughts were busy. He was thinking of Ethel Russell, and wondering if, in case he managed to do her a great favor, she would reward him with her affection. Never before had he been so impressed by a girl, and he determined to do his utmost for her cause.

In the midst of his reflections came a recollection of the horrible affair of the previous night, and as a huge wall seemed to arise between her and himself, he reached the saloon in a reckless mood.

He entered.

The saloon was a long, narrow place, rough, and none too clean, but it had the reputation of supplying good liquor, and the patronage was always good.

Nick seated himself at a table. He was cordially greeted by the men near at hand, among whom he was a favorite; but he was not in a mood for conversation, and soon leaned his chair back against the wall and began surveying the crowd.

There was little there to interest him, and he had once more relapsed into deep thought, when loud words from a table near at hand attracted his attention. Two persons seated side by side had drifted into an argument as to their respective merits as wrestlers, and the discussion grew so warm that they finally arose to settle the matter.

Leadville Leon, looking at them languidly, saw that one was a stout man of middle age, the other was but little older than himself, but his indifference was soon destroyed.

The younger man walked directly up to him.

"Pard," said he, bluffly, "we want seconds in this hyar set-to, an' you seem ter me like a sportin' man. Will you serve on ther jury in my behalf? I'm a cowboy from ther ranges, and my name is Charles Chuzzlewit. I'm a stranger hyar in Leadville, but I never forgit a man what helps me over ther fence."

Nick had been on the point of refusing, but when Chuzzlewit stated that he was a stranger, he changed his mind and resolved to cast off his gloomy mood.

The wrestle was to be for the drinks for the crowd, and the affair soon became one of importance. The thirsty audience gathered around, a ring was made, and the principals cast off all superfluous clothing to prepare for the grapple.

There is a good deal of excitement about such

an affair, and this one did not drop behind the average. For half an hour the room was in an uproar, but when the third bout was decided in the cowboy's favor, he was hailed as the victor—he had won two out of three falls.

After resuming his coat, he sat down beside Leadville Nick, as in duty bound, and they fell into conversation.

Chuzzlewit was a very plump fellow, and Nick suspected that he had never been a hard worker, but he was jolly and good-natured, and the Boy Sport found him really entertaining. Having been challenged, they played a game of cards against two adversaries, and winning easily, became so friendly that the cowboy proposed a stroll about the town.

"This 'ere is my first appearance in Leadville," he said, "an' as I am nat'rally a bashful boy, I hate ter amble 'round alone."

Leon did not object, and they went out together. The evening had reached that point when Leadville is at its highest temperature. The men who imbibe without due judgment were arousing themselves, and trying to arouse every other resident. Long-drawn yells floated out on the night air, sounding not unlike the death-yell of some benighted Indian, but really merely testifying to the strength of Leadville whisky.

Nick and Chuzzlewit walked down the street, looking and listening, but at the same time talking busily. The cowboy grew confidential, and told of his adventures on the cattle-ranges, and from some of them it appeared that he was none too scrupulous about his way of doing business.

Confidence usually begets confidence, but Nick Leon had always found it to his advantage to keep his affairs to himself, and he made no attempt to match these revelations.

Moreover, he was beginning to have some doubts in regard to this jolly cowboy. Was he really what he seemed, and, if so, was he no more?

Leadville Nick had used his eyes well, and unless he was greatly mistaken, Chuzzlewit wore a wig—a strange piece of property for a rough-and-ready cowboy.

This discovery led the Boy Sport to look further, and he began to doubt if the youth of his companion was not also a fraud. He saw wrinkles about his eyes which were more suitable for a man of middle age than one of twenty years.

With suspicion once started, Nick's belief that he was in the company of a disguised man increased rapidly and became a certainty; while he no longer doubted but what the wrestling-match was planned to bring about this acquaintance.

Such being the case, why was he thus shadowed? Was this counterfeit cowboy a detective or an agent of some private party?

These questions were not easy to answer, but the reader may be sure that Chuzzlewit's market value as a jolly friend went up in a cloud of smoke. At the best he was a spy, and spies are always disagreeable.

Despite his suspicions, Nick Leon continued to act naturally, for he was anxious to let the self-styled cowboy carry on his little scheme

and make his intentions clear. The Boy Sport was armed, and he knew how to care for himself as well as any man.

Due reflection satisfied him that Chuzzlewit was either a detective or an agent of David Sargent, but, in either case, he resolved to give him no satisfaction.

Their promenade had taken them to the further end of the city and Nick proposed to return, but the cowboy suggested that they go a little further to a rocky extent of ground beyond the main cabins, and sit down for a while.

Nick readily agreed, and yet he had no doubt but what the request concealed a trap. Men of Chuzzlewit's ostensible character are more given to sitting down in a saloon with a well-filled glass before them than in a wild and romantic place.

Still the Boy Sport felt no fear. He was well-armed and he knew how to use his weapons, and if he was molested, he meant to show his claws with a vengeance.

Without any words to that effect, Chuzzlewit had taken the lead and was going toward a mass of rocks which were so far out of the city limits that only two cabins nestled near them.

On these rocks and on the cabins Leadville Leon fixed a keen gaze, for there, he felt sure, was some species of danger for him.

CHAPTER VI.

A GENUINE GHOST.

CHUZZLEWIT had never been more talkative than when they neared the cabins, for Leadville Nick, who was equally on the alert, noticed that he had dropped his former exaggerated and illiterate language and was speaking good English.

More than this, he was looking sharply at the cabins, or the rocks, in front of them.

"The pinch is at hand," thought the Boy Sport. "His jumping-jack is dead ahead, and he is so absorbed in looking for a sign from it that he forgets to talk dialect. It almost looks as though there was a hitch in his plans. As well so, perhaps, as any way, for if he tries any games on me I shall fight my way out."

He had secretly drawn his revolver, and, after making sure that the cartridges were all in position, was holding it ready for use.

As the self-styled cowboy neared the cabins he slackened his pace to that of a snail, and, though still talking rapidly, looked with great interest at the scenery in front of him.

His uneasiness was so apparent that Leadville Leon secretly smiled, and had he not resolved to act innocently in the case, he would have stated his suspicions plainly.

Beside the first cabin Chuzzlewit came to a full stop.

"I want ter light my pipe," he said.

"Have a cigar."

"No, no; much obleeged, but I never smoke anything but this ole clay. Jest give me this hyar consarn an' a leetle navy, an' I kin take a heap o' comfort."

The cowboy drew a knife and a piece of tobacco from his pocket and began to cut with a moderation which showed that he was killing time.

Nick Leon did not cease to watch closely,

although convinced that there was a serious break in Mr. Chuzzlewit's plans. Perhaps it was in the scheme for some one to steal up on and deal him a swift, silent and deadly blow.

The cowboy growled a good deal over his labor, and pretended that the tobacco was dry and hard, but in spite of all he had to complete the work at last.

Next, he drew out his pipe and went through the motions of filling it, but, by watching keenly, Nick saw that it had previously been filled to the top, and that all the fresh supply was allowed to fall to the ground.

Here was positive proof against Chuzzlewit.

He lighted his pipe and began puffing furiously.

"Let's walk around a bit, an' see that thar is no one lurkin' nigh. This hyar is jest ther place fur cut-throats."

Nick smiled grimly. The cowboy had taken the lead out of his hands without any explanation.

They started around the cabin, and the circle had been half made, when the cowboy suddenly paused.

"Hallo! what's that?" he ejaculated.

Leadville Leon had also paused, for his eyes had been as quick as those of his companion, and both saw a strange object at the side of the cabin.

In form it bore a close resemblance to a man, resting in a sitting position with his back to the building; but it had one feature not common to residents of this world. From head to foot it was of a ghostly white, and on the whole presented an appearance calculated to make a superstitious person shake around in his boots unless he wore a close fit.

"Thunder and lightning!" observed Chuzzlewit.

Nick caught and weighed his tone. It expressed no fear, but surprise and anger were certainly there.

"That's a ghost," said the Boy Sport, calmly.

"Do you think so?"

"Haven't a doubt of it. He is probably waiting for midnight—that's the hour when ghosts go on their rackets—and if we wait, you'll see that fellow get up and slip away like—well, I may say, like a ghost."

Chuzzlewit looked at him sharply.

"More likely it is some intoxicated person," he said, once more losing his faulty English.

"Perhaps you are right. It looks like a human form wrapped up in a sheet. Suppose we investigate."

Nick had arrived at an opinion, but he was not sure, and he wished to press the case forward.

"We will do so," said the cowboy. "I want to get an understanding of this matter. I can't see into it."

They strode forward together, and as they neared the creature in white, Leadville Leon saw that it was indeed a man wrapped in a sheet or something of the kind; and as he remembered that the cowboy had seemed to be looking for something which did not appear, he strongly suspected that an ally of his companion had fallen asleep at his post.

Chuzzlewit walked directly to the man, grasped his arm and gave a vigorous shake. The man in white did not stir.

"Come, wake up, here, you idiot!" said the cowboy, sharply. "What are you trying to do?"

Still no answer.

"He sleeps soundly," said Leadville Leon, strangely impressed by the circumstance.

Chuzzlewit tore away the white robe, which was indeed a sheet, and a man was discovered, sitting with his back to the building.

Both Nick and the cowboy seemed agitated, and the latter bent and touched the unknown.

"Dead, by Judas!" he exclaimed.

Nick grew so interested that he too moved forward and touched the man's face. A trifle of warmth still remained, but the coldness of death was fast stealing over him.

"There has been foul play here," uttered the cowboy.

"Did you know him?" Nick asked.

Chuzzlewit hesitated.

"No," he then said, slowly.

"How did he die?"

The question aroused the self-styled cowboy. He bent over the dead man and began an examination, but it was soon concluded.

"Stabbed to the heart!" he said, in a tone of horror.

Nick had at first suspected that it was more of the work of Siroc, the Skull-Cracker, and to settle the doubt he investigated Chuzzlewit's statement. Beyond a doubt, death had come as he had said.

"This is mysterious," said the Boy Sport.

"It is villainous!" cried the cowboy, "but I will learn who did this deed and have vengeance. I swear it!"

"You are strangely interested, considering he was a total stranger to you," said Nick, quietly.

Chuzzlewit paused for a moment.

"It is a case of murder, an' sech should allays interest an honest man," he replied, suddenly returning to his rough way of speaking. "I don't b'lieve in sech doin's, I don't."

"Nor I. But, what of this sheet?"

"I don't understand that."

"When a man wraps himself up in this shape he usually intends to play the ghost, but in this case the ghost is a genuine one, so far as absence of life goes. He can never be more."

The cowboy did not answer. He stood erect and began flashing keen glances around. The jolly, good-natured expression had vanished from his face and he seemed like a tiger at bay.

All this was instructive to Leadville Leon. He saw the mask fully off and knew his companion was more than a cowboy. What he was, he could not tell, but he would have wagered a good deal just then that he was a detective. His face was not that of a villain or an assassin, and it was pretty evident that he had a deep object in view.

If, indeed, he was a detective, why had he taken so much trouble to become acquainted with the Boy Sport? Naturally, the latter grasped at one certain theory. Already, he believed, suspicion was directed to him as a participant in the hotel tragedy, and a detective

had been set upon his track to ferret out the truth.

This discovery would have alarmed the majority of people, but Nick Leon arose superior to the danger.

"I am with you in this work," he said, placing one hand on Chuzzlewit's arm. "It was a dastard's deed and we will work together to find the culprit."

The "cowboy" looked at him keenly.

"So be it," he said, slowly. "We will work together."

Once more he bent over the dead man. Not an article of any kind remained in his pockets, and the searcher hazarded the opinion that he had been killed for his money. Whether such was really his opinion was a question.

"We will leave the body here," said Chuzzlewit, anon, "an' I'll see thet a gang comes down arter it. That's all we kin do fur now. Come, let's go back."

They went, but the cowboy no longer talked glibly. He seemed in deep thought, even gloomy, but as they neared the center of the village, he suddenly aroused.

"You may as well go home now, pard," he said. "Whar an' when kin I see you ter-morrer?"

Nick took the hint and made no remonstrance. He named the place and time for the next interview, and then the two separated.

The Boy Sport had not gone far when some one came to his side, and he recognized Siroc.

"Quite an adventure!" chuckled the Skull-Cracker, abruptly.

"What do you mean?" Nick asked.

"Why, the one you have had."

"What do you know about it?"

"I know ther ghost didn't work," said the man, with another chuckle.

"Perhaps you know how he died."

"So I do. He war the victim o' a common thief. He fell asleep at his post an' got a dig in his ribs."

"At his post? You know more of this affair than I do, I believe. Will you give me light?"

"I s'pose I kin, ef it'll do ye any good. Mebbe you think I mesmerized ther critter, but you are wrong. I never lay them out in that fashion. The galoot that war with you planned a ghost scene, but while ther ghost waited fur you he got rubbed out. It war me who wrapped his sheet 'round him an' sot him up ag'in' ther buildin'."

"So you were near all the while?"

"I opine I was."

"Do you know the man who was with me?"

"I know he is a durned bad man."

CHAPTER VII.

EXPLANATIONS WHICH DEEPEN A MYSTERY.

THE Boy Sport was growing deeply interested.

"A bad man? In what way is he bad?"

"On ther shoot, with ther knife, an' particular p'ison fur them as has a secret ter hide," Siroc replied.

"Is he a detective?"

"I reckon he is."

"Then what meant all his mummery to-night?"

"He sized you wrong, my boy. Says he ter

hissself, 'Hyar is a boy; he must be superstitious.' Then ther blamed fool was silly enough ter think that when his patent ghost riz up outer ther 'arth an' said, 'I am ther ghost o' Thomas Neal,' you would weaken an' give ther biz away."

Leadville Nick could not avoid a start. Neal was the man murdered at the Eagle Hotel, and it was useless to hope that Siroc had stumbled on the words by chance. Plainly he knew what he was talking about, and there was ample need for the Boy Sport to be on his guard.

The Skull-Cracker might be a friend, as he had thus far appeared, or he might be in league with this other detective he mentioned.

"Give away what business?" he asked.

"All about ther hotel racket. Come, Mr. Leadville Leon, don't try ter fool an ole settler. I'm a war eagle on ther eye, I am, an' I kin smell smoke when thar is any in ther air. I know that you went with Sargent an' Bonney ter do that biz, but I know, too, that you warn't prepared fur ther way they did it. I don't hold you in any way guilty, but that thar critter that calls hisself Chuzzlewit has got his left eye on ye, an' he is bad, durned bad!"

"This is all Greek to me," said Nick, still suspecting a trap.

"O' course, but that ain't any reason why you should look wild when the air is full o' smoke."

The Boy Sport knew not what to do. He dared not confide in Siroc, but at the same time it was clear that he was menaced by danger.

"Well, who is Chuzzlewit?" he asked.

"A detective, o' course, though he ain't half so sharp as he thinks he is. He hes got his left eye on ye, but ef we can't fool him we deserve ter be mesmerized. His scheme didn't work ter-night, did it? Wal, it won't work at all ef you are sharp."

"You talk very strangely. Who are you that assumes to know so much? You call yourself Siroc, the Skull-Cracker. Of course you have another name. What is it, and who are you?"

"Ther driftin' sands o' time hev kivered n up, name, identity an' all ther rest. Don't tr ter resurrect me. Peace ter my ashes!"

"I believe you are a detective."

"I'll sw'ar I am not. That Chuzzlewit—his real name is Oakes, an' he b'longs in Denver—is no friend o' mine, nor is Dave Sargent. I mean ter hang on ter you ef you don't shake me off. You are in a tight pinch hyer, between Oakes an' Sargent. Ther detective is square enough, but ther case is one whar you need ter mistrust him same as you do Sargent."

Leadville Nick looked at the speaker in perplexity.

Was he really as friendly as he pretended, or was he a detective in disguise, like the counterfeit cowboy?

It was a hard question to answer. The man was bluff, but pleasant, and if he was filling an assumed part, he acted it with unwavering fidelity. At all times he was Siroc in his manner.

Still, the Boy Sport doubted him.

"You have turned my head so that I can't tell what you mean or who I am," he said, forcing a laugh. "I'll leave you now, and see you later."

"Kerect. Go an' git a wink o' sleep; act yer-self, only don't talk ter strangers; an' ef yer get inter trouble, an' your inemies are bad, mebber I'll happen around, an' lay 'em out in my scientific way."

The Skull-Cracker waved his hand in farewell and sauntered away, leaving Leadville Leon more at fault than ever. Who was this strange man who knew so much about him?

How much did he know? Plainly, too much for Nick's safety, for if he did not know all about the hotel tragedy he had made a very accurate guess.

The Boy Sport felt the net closing in about him, and he knew not which way to turn. If Siroc had learned so much, how long would it be before his secret would be the property of all Leadville? It would be spoken injudiciously—it would reach the ears of the authorities, and then he would be brought to the bar of justice for murder!

"I must flee—I must leave Leadville!" he thought, excitedly. "It is one thing to brave the wrath of man, and another to defy the law. I dare not do it; blood-stained as I am, I must flee for my life!"

He started forward as though to at once carry his resolution into effect, and then stopped more suddenly than he had started.

"Ethel!" he thought. "If I go, I shall never see her again; I shall not be able to carry out my vow to repair the wrong I have done."

For a moment he stood irresolute, and then, wheeling, he started toward the Eagle Hotel. He had taken a sudden resolution; he would see Ethel that evening, and ask her to explain what was mysterious.

On her statement his future actions would be based.

He soon reached the hotel, and, as the hour was not late, found little trouble in securing admission to the young girl's presence. She was surrounded by several ladies, who had come to her aid after her trouble, but she sent them away to listen to Nicholas.

Seen in the bright light, with her golden hair uncovered, she looked more than ever handsome, but the Boy Sport knew how to be at ease in such society without being too forward, and he let little time run to waste.

"You will be surprised to see me," he said, "but there is a prospect that I may be called away from Leadville on business early in the morning, and I have ventured to call now. When I offered my services to you, I was wholly sincere, and it would please me to at once know what you promised to tell me to-morrow."

"You shall know all, Mr. Leon," Ethel promptly answered. "You have proved yourself my friend, and as such it is your right and my pleasure. Still, what I have to tell is so perplexing that you will merely be thrown into doubt and uncertainty."

"Are you in such a state?"

"I am, indeed. Listen, and you shall hear all. I was born in Illinois, and there I lived with my father and mother until six years ago when father left for the West to seek that fortune which came so slowly in our native State. After that, mother and I lived alone, but, reg-

ularly, once a month, money came from my father.

"This continued until a few weeks ago, when my mother died, but I may as well state that, for two or three years, I have suspected that some trouble lay heavily on my mother's heart. Yes, more than that, I knew it. I often saw her in tears, and I believed my father was in some way concerned with her sorrow, but how, I never learned.

"At last she died as I said. Then Thomas Neal, our old servant, or, rather the man who cared for our little farm while father was away, telegraphed to him at Denver, where he had been for two or three years. An answer came back promptly, bidding Thomas take me and hasten to a designated hotel in Denver.

"We did as directed, but on arriving there, found only a letter in which father said he had secured a good position at Leadville, and, having left Denver abruptly, would receive us here at the Eagle Hotel.

"We came on promptly, but on our arrival we inquired in vain for Edward Russell—such was my father's name, Mr. Leon. We spent the whole evening in the vain search and then retired. What occurred you already know. Poor Thomas—"

Ethel paused, overcome by her emotions, and Leadville Nick, equally affected, hoarsely muttered:

"You have my sympathy!"

He spoke the truth, but it was not half told. Words would have but faintly portrayed the horror which was in his heart. Not only had he been an accomplice in a murder, but he had left a young girl friendless, a thousand miles from home.

If ever a man was filled with remorse, it was Leadville Leon at that moment.

Ethel struggled bravely for composure and then continued:

"All day I have looked and wished for my father, all day the police have searched for him, but no one knows Edward Russell or has seen a man answering his description. I thought I had a clew when a note was handed me by a Chinaman; a note which gave me directions for that walk you saw me take. It would have been a fatal one but for you. In the letter the writer said that my father was just then under a cloud, and dared not appear, but that if I would follow the directions of the letter, without saying a word to any one, I should see him."

"You are now satisfied that it was simply a decoy?" questioned Nick.

"Yes."

"Of whom?"

"The roughs of Leadville, plainly."

"And nothing more?"

Ethel looked at him earnestly.

"Do you suspect there is more?"

"I suspect that you have enemies in Leadville who would—well, perhaps not kill you as they did Thomas Neal, but put you out of sight."

The girl grew pale.

"I had thought of that," she murmured.

"That's the way I explain matters," said the Boy Sport, decisively, "and it's on that basis

that I'm going to investigate the matter. If I can get excused from the business I mentioned and I think I can, I'll be looking for signs without delay."

Ethel thanked him warmly and her gratitude went straight to his heart, but he retained his composure and soon took his departure.

The visit had shown him fresh complications, but he was resolved to dare all, remain in Leadville and solve the mystery of the girl's life.

CHAPTER VIII.

KIDNAPPED.

ONCE beyond the hotel, the Boy Sport went to a lonely spot and proceeded to put his wits at work to gather up the missing threads of the case he had undertaken.

He suspected that David Sargent was at the bottom of all of Ethel's trouble, and that the letter which had lured her to Leadville had not been written by Edward Russell, but by Sargent himself. He also had a suspicion that the telegram which had brought her from Illinois emanated from the same source.

If such was the case, several questions thrust themselves forward. Where was Russell, what interest had Sargent in the matter, and who was the man the plotter had really intended to rob at the hotel?

The last problem arose from the fact that, to all appearance, the papers secured by the robbery had not been what Sargent expected, and it was clear that the wrong man had been robbed.

Ethel had said that for some time previous to her mother's death, she had been afflicted by some secret trouble, and the daughter believed it arose in some way from her father.

Had Sargent managed to mix into his life, viper-like, as he had done into that of the Boy Sport himself?

As for Russell's present whereabouts, all was doubt and uncertainty, but Nick suspected that he was still in Denver.

Having arrived at this conclusion, he determined to once more see Ethel, and he started back toward the hotel. He was, however, in that frame of mind when people form plans and discard them in the same moment, feeling themselves creatures of fate more than their own will, and after going a short distance he concluded that the hour was too late for another interview and he turned back toward his own quarters.

He experienced a feeling of loathing at the thought of again going near Sargent and Bonney, but if he succeeded in his work it was necessary to keep up the association for a while longer.

Any prolonged absence at that time would be sure to result in a raising of Sargent's suspicions.

The Boy Sport strode along through the cluster of shanties toward that of his companions, but he was so deep in thought that he neglected the precautions so necessary for one's safety in that place.

Danger was abroad for him, but he suspected nothing until three men suddenly sprung from behind a building and seized him. Each one had evidently had his work laid out in advance,

and in a twinkling Leadville Leon felt a strong grasp on each of his arms, while a third brawny fellow clasped his hands over his mouth.

The Boy Sport was strong and quick-witted, but in his preoccupation of mind he had been taken wholly unawares, and he was really as helpless as a child.

He put forth all his strength in a struggle for liberty, but he was held as in a vise, and the attempt was soon abandoned.

"That's right, my young bantam," growled one of the men; "you may as well stand still, ef yer don't want ter be smashed."

Nick could not reply with the broad hand over his mouth, so he merely stood quietly in the hands of his captors.

They did not waste much time. The youth's hands were drawn together and bound behind his back, and then a gag was slipped between his teeth with a celerity which astonished him.

Liberty was gone, and with it all chance to speak a word in his defense, or to ask for explanations.

Having rendered him helpless, the kidnappers at once started away, leading their prisoner between them.

He walked without urging, for knowing that it would be useless to resist, he resolved to gain a little of their good-will if possible. One of the two had been arranging a handkerchief in bandage form as they went, and when this was placed over his eyes Nick had no idea where they were going.

Several sharp turns were made, doubtless to confuse him, and then the whole party tramped on rapidly.

The Boy Sport vainly wondered into whose hands he had fallen. Possibly it was a game originated by the "toughs" of Leadville, but he had a strong presentiment that he owed his trouble to the affair at the Eagle Hotel, and finally settled upon the theory that he had been seized by Chuzzlewit, *alias* Oakes, or whatever was his name.

Perhaps the detective hoped to frighten or torture him into a confession.

For some time he was led forward and then the party paused, a bolt clicked in a lock, and he was told to step upward twice. He obeyed, and was ushered into a building of some sort, the bolt clicked again, this time behind him, and he was really a prisoner.

Next, he was led up-stairs, and into a room where the bandage was removed from his eyes. All was darkness; but one of the men was striking a light, and a dull illumination was soon secured.

For the first time Leadville Leon had a view of his captors, and but one glance was needed to show him that they were of that villainous class which made the city so notorious a place.

Ragged, dirty, with bushy beards and uncombed hair, it only needed their brutal faces in addition to prove that they were "roughs, toughs, and tearers."

Truly, he had got into bad company.

As soon as the light was produced, they searched their prisoner and removed all his weapons, after which the gag was taken from between his teeth.

"Now then, young feller, set down," said one of the trio roughly.

Nick obeyed. His hands were still bound behind his back, and he was not in any condition to fight, even had he cared to try his luck against three stout men.

"Well, this is a pleasant little sociable, I must say," he remarked, coolly.

"Glad you like it," growled one of the roughs.

"Don't jump at conclusions, my friend. I didn't say I liked it. A bull-fight is always down on the bill of fare as *sport*, but I don't suppose the bull takes any pleasure in it. In this case, I'm the bull. Will you tell me why I am brought here?"

"Because you are wanted."

"Who wants me?"

"We do."

"Well, you've got me. Now, what do you intend to do with me?"

"Ain't you rushin' ther funeral a leetle?" asked the man, sarcastically. "Jest you set still, an' I'arn as you go along. Bill, you go fur Appleby."

One of the trio went out, and Leadville Leon quietly surveyed the room. It was of medium size, very strongly built—the single window being six feet above the floor, and armed with heavy bars—and without any furniture except a table, two rough stools, and a dirty bed in one corner.

Nick suspected that the place was to be his prison, but he made no comments; and silence reigned until the door again opened and the rough returned, accompanied by another man at whom the Boy Sport stared in amazement.

Personally, he was at least six feet in height, and correspondingly proportioned throughout his huge frame. His shoulders were broad and thick, his arms long and muscular—even his head was made on the general plan and was a marvel in size.

Over this head, an abundant crop of hair ran wild. The utmost confusion prevailed, no two hairs seemed in harmony but each one looked as though it had set up in business for itself, and it was a scene of great confusion, which remark will also apply to his beard.

His dress consisted of pants and a flannel shirt, the latter being open in front so as to expose the lower part of his huge neck. His feet were bare.

When we add that this man had a look of wild ferocity, and that in his hand he carried a gleaming ax, the reader will perceive that he was not an inviting individual.

"Appleby," said the previous speaker of the trio, "we have brought you a prisoner."

The giant turned his eyes on Leadville Nick and they seemed to be burning in their sockets.

"Woof!" he said, in a deep tone which was like the growl of a bear.

"We want you to look out for him the best you know how. His escape would do a great deal of damage and you must watch like a cat. This room is strong, but in order to make all sure, he must not be allowed any liberty."

"Woof!" again growled the giant.

"Of course, you will be well paid for taking care of him."

At this point Nick felt a touch on his leg and, looking down, saw a small dog looking into his face. The animal had entered with the giant, but the Boy Sport had been too much occupied with looking at his master to before notice him.

Now, he saw a dog which seemed to be a hybrid of some sort, since he could not name his species, but he had a most vicious look and at once proved his disposition by growling at the youth.

The latter spoke gently to him, but he grew so excited that it looked as though he meditated an attack and Nick ceased.

His leading captor smiled grimly.

"Tain't a very promisin' case, eh?" he said.

"That dog is named Jip, and you can't bribe him. We are goin' ter leave you hyar with him an' Appleby, an' I hope you'll be sociable, but I tell you that words will be wasted. Appleby can't be bought, and as he ain't got no tongue he can't talk. Ef you want ter get along quiet an' easy, you had better let him alone. Sometimes he gits excited an' goes stark mad, an' ef he should do that he is liable ter chop your head open with his ax. He's killed seven men that way in this very room, an' it's fun for him. Don't rile him therefore, onless you want ter die. I give ye this warnin' out o' good-will, an' now I hope you'll be sensible an' avoind a row."

CHAPTER IX.

THE MAN WITH THE AX.

THE rough arose as though to end the interview, but the Boy Sport was not so willing to drop the matter at that point.

"Wait a bit," he said. "I would like to know why I have been seized and brought here, how long I have got to remain, and any other items you may see fit to throw in."

"I sha'n't throw in any, my young bantam. You have be'n brought hyar by one who didn't care ter kill ye, an' he hopes you will be as sensible as he is. Jest sot yerself down an' be easy, an' don't wake up Appleby. He will put that ax clean through ye ef he gits on his mad."

"Never mind; I'm not going to quarrel with him, for I don't hanker to be chopped up. But, see here, how long have I got to stay in this pen?"

"Jest as long as we see fit. Now, you give yer jaw a rest, an' don't get me mad, or I may be wuss than Appleby. All you've got ter do is ter sot hyar an' sleep, by turns, an' never git weary."

"But—"

"But nothin'!" roared the man. "You keep still."

He took the giant aside and gave him a few directions in a subdued voice. The fellow nodded several times, but the expression of his face did not change. The wild, ferocious look seemed frozen in its place.

Shortly after, the original captors went out and Leadville Leon was left alone with Appleby and the dog. The latter kept his place a few feet from the prisoner, and between him and the

door, and gazed up into his face with undisguised venom in every glance.

Plainly, only one word would be necessary to launch him upon poor Nick.

Appleby first proceeded to lock the door, and then, after putting the key in his pocket, sat down on the second stool, holding his ax between his knees.

Nicholas Leon was as brave as any youth of his years, but he never thought of denying that he was afraid at that moment. Both of his strange captors were full of hostility, and the man, at least, would make a terrible enemy.

Looking at his immense shoulders, his huge arms, and broad, thick hands, Nick could not doubt his ability to strangle him with one hand.

Never before had an ax looked so formidable. The keen, glittering steel possessed a strong fascination for him, and he could not but imagine how it would go crashing through his head if the giant so wished.

The other man had said that Appleby sometimes went mad and killed his prisoners, and the Boy Sport could not doubt it. His face was that of a man nearly, or wholly, insane at all times, and the prisoner was prepared to believe that it would be a rare treat for him to use the ax.

Nick's gaze wandered from man to dog, a pair so much alike in nature. The persistence of the animal was not only aggravating, but remarkable. His gaze never wandered from the prisoner's face; he seemed to every instant expect permission to make an attack.

Nick prepared to make the best of his situation and did not try to address Appleby. The most he could hope from him was that he would remain at his post and attempt no familiarities.

After a while, the Boy Sport ventured to survey the room, but there was nothing new to be seen. The place was strongly built, and the barred window and heavy door told how difficult it would be to effect an escape, even with the guards out of the way.

An hour passed on and Nick tired of his position. He saw the bed in the corner, and though it was a miserable affair resting on the bare floor, he resolved to occupy it and make the best of his captivity.

When he arose he half expected the dog would attack him, but though those menacing eyes followed him closely, the animal did not stir his body, and Appleby, with his eyes fixed on vacancy, did not give any sign of attention.

Nick lay down with his face toward his guards and reflected on his situation. To whom did he owe this misfortune? He felt sure Oakes, the detective, was not concerned in it, and he could only decide that the hand of David Sargent was again visible.

Judging from appearances, his evil genius had suspected his intentions and taken measures to guard against a confession.

If such was the case, what would be the end of the affair? Plainly, his life was little valued, since such guards were put over him. In case of an attack from the man with the ax, he would be utterly helpless, since his hands were bound behind him.

Leadville Leon did not despair, for his was

not a weak nature, but as he looked at his grim guards he felt that he was in a close corner.

At about the same time that Nick was captured, a man entered the saloon of the Eagle Hotel and walked up to the bar. Probably he had seen forty years of life, and if he was as solid as he looked, he would have made the scales kick the beam at two hundred and fifty pounds.

With all this flesh upon him he was not a nimble man, and he waddled like a duck as he made his way across the room. Still, the barkeeper would not have laughed for a five-dollar gold-piece, for the dress of the new-comer indicated that he had plenty of money in his pockets, and gold always stirs up the human heart.

This imposing-looking gentleman informed the barkeeper that he wished to secure a room for an indefinite period, and he paid in advance in a way which impressed the god of the bar very forcibly.

Being weary, the fleshy man at once went to his room, and the crowd began to comment.

"Ef we had his money, we wouldn't hev ter work," said one battered-looking miner, heaving a deep sigh.

"I reckon he is a Denver banker," said another.

"Or a politician."

"I was about ter remark that he looked like our Gov'ner," added a fourth.

Nearly every one in the saloon looked awed and admiring, but one man in the crowd did not seem affected in that way.

Among the patrons of the place was Siroc, the Skull-Cracker, and he made no comment on the imposing-looking guest, though it was a fact that he had looked at him sharply, and after he had disappeared, the mesmerizer's face bore a troubled look.

He scarcely heard the comments of the other men, but, after ten minutes devoted to deep thought, he abruptly arose and left the room.

Gaining the street, he walked on for some distance, and then, arriving at a house which he seemed to have some difficulty in identifying, he rapped loudly.

The door was opened by Kit Allen.

"Hallo!" said the latter, in surprise. "I did not expect to see you so soon; but you are welcome. Come in!"

"Thankee!" said Siroc, with a deep bow, "but I want see ye alone."

"Then here is just the chance. Every one except myself is out. Come in and sit down."

The Skull-Cracker objected no further, and was soon ushered into a cozy little room. It was in this house, which belonged to a well-to-do carpenter, that Kit had lived ever since coming to Leadville. He was doing well financially, and he hoped to soon be able to return East. In the mean while he kept away from saloons and roughs, and carried a firm head on his shoulders.

"I've jest come from ther Eagle," said Siroc, abruptly, as they sat down.

"Is there anything new?"

"Yas, thar is, an' I want your help."

"About what?"

"Thar has a galoot tuk quarters at ther hotel that means mischief. He must be shut off."

"Why, what is the trouble?"

"Wal, I skeercely know his game, but it has suthin' ter do with ther gal—Miss Russell—an' you kin bet your last dollar he ain't her friend."

"I don't clearly understand," said Kit. "Who is this man?"

Siroc hesitated for a moment.

"I didn't say as ter that," he finally replied.

"No, but of course you know him, or you would not know that he was there with evil intentions. Come, Siroc, speak frankly. You and I are both friends of Miss Russell, and if she is in danger we must join hands and help her out. Give me a clear idea of what new danger menaces her, and I'll do my best in the case."

"Wal," said the Skull-Cracker, slowly, "I'll tell all except one thing. You ask who ther critter is. I can't tell that, for reasons o' my own, but I know him ter be a bad man from Bengal. I war a-settin' in ther Eagle Saloon a lee-tle while ago, when I see'd him walk in. I smelt smoke at onc't, an' fixed my eagle eye on him. He 'gaged a room, an' then I tumbled ter his game. Thar was no more reason fur him ter go thar an' hite a room nor thar was fur you or me. Consequently, I opine he means ter play ther robber or assassin on ther gal."

"You begin to talk now," said Kit placidly. "Keep on and I shall praise you anon. I see you know more about Miss Russell than I do; and I see you know a good deal about this man or you would not suspect that he was an enemy of the girl. Now, my good man, may not this very person have been the one who killed Thomas Neal?"

The Skull-Cracker chuckled as though he had heard a joke.

"Thunderation! how you youngsters do rush at ideas," he said. "Now, I ain't said nothin' o' ther kind—"

"No; but you might as well. Come, Siroc, deal frankly with me and I will do the same by you. I suspected from the first you were more than you seemed, and now—"

"Hol' on! hol' on!" said the mesmerizer, imploringly. "Jest leave enough breath fur me ter git an occasional gasp, will ye?" he said. "You are cl'ar 'way off, an' ther funder you go ther wuss you git. Let us drop it. Come, now, what d'ye say—will ye help me in this work?"

"I'm with you," said Kit, promptly. "Just let me know what is wanted, and you'll find me around."

CHAPTER X.

JUST AFTER MIDNIGHT.

IN the mean while the fleshy man before referred to had gone to his room. He had given the name of C. L. Arbuckle to the clerk below, which destroyed the theory that he might be the Governor of Colorado, but if he was not a man of importance, he was sailing under false colors.

Once alone in his room, he began to unbutton his coat in great haste.

"Bah! I shall roast!" he muttered.

He cast aside his coat, and with it went an amount of padding which reduced his size by about one hundred pounds. What was left of him, with the exception of his face, looked very much like David Sargent.

He sat down in a chair and began fanning himself with his hat.

"So far, good!" he muttered. "I'm in the sanctuary of innocence, like a wolf, or a black sheep, or something of the kind, and I'll see to it that I make my mark. Those fools below thought me a magnate, as I intended, and they won't for a moment suspect I am anything else. To carry out my plan, I'll go to bed at once."

And the man, who was indeed Sargent, blew out his light and lay down without undressing.

Some time after he heard slight sounds from the adjoining room, as though its occupant had just come in, but as these sounds soon ceased he gave scarcely a thought to the matter.

Several hours passed on, and the hotel became dark and silent. The lodgers had retired, and as the customers in the saloon below became few in number, such as remained were invited to call again and sent home.

Silence reigned through the Eagle, and midnight approached.

Ever since his arrival Sargent had remained on the bed and taken great pains not to stir so as to attract any one's attention. Certain events were liable to occur, in which case he wished to figure as an innocent man.

The striking of twelve o'clock by the time-piece in the hall acted upon Sargent at once. He arose partially, and sitting on the edge of the bed, listened attentively.

"I reckon I am the only person astir," he thought, with his bland, oily smile.

Then he stood erect. He had previously removed his boots, and his stockings made no noise on the floor. This was of importance to him, for he had work to do which required silence, caution and nerve.

Drawing a small bottle from his pocket, he first oiled the bolt of his door, and then pushed it back. Again he smiled, and then, without further loss of time, prepared for work.

Opening his door cautiously, he stepped into the hall. Except for himself, not even a mouse seemed to be astir. He had the scene to himself—what would come of it?

Creeping along with a cat-like motion which seemed peculiar to him, he soon reached another door. Once more he paused to listen. All was silent.

Then from his pocket he drew some sort of an instrument, which he thrust into the keyhole. A click followed, and the bolt had been turned back.

The prowler crept inside. Then for a moment he was busy over some motion, and the scent of chloroform filled the room. He had saturated a sponge and intended to drug some one.

In one corner of the room stood a bed, and toward this he at once crept. All was darkness, and he had some disadvantage with which to contend, but he had a pretty correct idea of the situation.

He located the pillow as well as he was able without betraying himself, and then, turning his head away, held the sponge forward.

If a sleeper breathed that air for a very few minutes insensibility would surely follow.

Sargent waited until he believed his purpose

accomplished, and then bent forward. If the occupant of the bed was not wholly under the power of the drug, it would be easy to finish the work.

Very much to the plotter's surprise, he found no one beneath his hand; the bed was empty.

He started back in astonishment, but as he did so something very like a hand closed around the back part of his neck, and another article, which was cold and hard, touched his temple.

"Be still, or you die!" hissed a voice in his ear. "I hold this game in my hand, and you haven't a trump. Do you choose life or death?"

It was a startling surprise for David. He knew the hard object at his temple was a revolver, and he read the fixed purpose of the man who addressed him. It would not do to dare that weapon; but David Sargent was old and sharp and he meant to slip out of the trap. Doubtless it was the clerk who thus spoke.

"Why—why, what—what's the matter?" he stammered.

"What are you doing in this room?"

"I just got up to look at the time," he said, not yet suspecting that anything serious was afoot.

"Whose watch do you usually look at in such cases?"

"My own, of course. What do you mean—"

"Does it require a dose of chloroform to open the case?"

"You talk very strangely," said Sargent. "Be careful, or I will report you to the proprietor."

"Report your grandfather!" was the irreverent reply. "See here, old fellow, your game won't work. You are in another person's room at midnight, and I must ask for an explanation. In the mean while, keep your hands from mischief and your lips from guile, or I'll salt you with a thirty-two caliber."

"This is my room," persisted Sargent.

"Perhaps you have rented the whole hotel and made preparations for an addition, but I doubt it. I will ask you to step down into the office."

Sargent saw that the crisis was at hand. He could not delay matters any further, and he must either fight or surrender. The room into which he had gone uninvited was that of Ethel Russell, and he could not understand why he had failed to find her and had been so unlucky as to find a man instead.

Perhaps if he had heard the interview between Siroc and Kit Allen he would have gained a clearer idea, for it was Kit who now held him by the neck.

Unluckily for the brave young Ohio youth, he had to deal with a man who was both cunning and very tricky. Kit's boldness could not be surpassed, but David excelled him in experience.

Without attempting to seize the revolver, Sargent suddenly stooped, caught his enemy by his legs and tossed him over his head upon the bed. The marvelous quickness with which he accomplished this difficult feat was simply astonishing; and no one was more amazed than Kit, who was discomfited and disarmed at one and the same moment.

If Sargent had seen fit just then he might have taken another dark crime upon his hands,

but, instead, he sprung for the window, threw it up and began creeping through.

We say began, for he had merely thrown one leg over the sill when Kit leaped pluckily upon him and the plotter found a tenacious grasp on his collar.

If Sargent had then turned at bay he would have found Kit Allen a most unenviable antagonist—but he had no such intention. He did not recognize his companion, but he had read his resolute nature in his voice and had no wish to remain and fight.

Consequently, when he found himself thus seized, he held fast to the window-sill and at the same time threw his body out and forward, and his unexpected trick succeeded so well that, though Kit held fast, he found a hundred and fifty pounds of flesh pulling down upon him.

Neither man liked the situation, for Sargent was beset by an unpleasant conviction that when Kit's hold broke he might get a bad fall.

Nevertheless, it would not do to protract this scene.

"Let go, curse you!" he hissed, letting go of the sill with one hand and striking at Kit.

The latter easily dodged the stroke and as promptly returned it, counting one on Sargent's mouth, but his own effort worked against him. With only one hand to hold the man, he lost his grip and Sargent shot downward.

Kit did not hesitate for a moment, but lightly touching the sill, he bounded through the window in pursuit.

There was risk in his way of going, as he speedily found.

He struck partly on the ground and partly against some other object, and both fell together.

Kit found a man in his grasp, and not doubting but what it was the prowler, he grappled with him and a vigorous struggle began.

It was of short duration, for Kit was in the hands of a man his physical superior, and in a short time he was rolled over on his back, held fast, and a heavy knee planted on his breast.

Then the pressure suddenly relaxed.

"Thunderation!" said a rough voice, "is it you?"

Kit Allen looked up and saw Siroc, the Skull-Cracker.

"Quick!" he cried; "the other man! Don't let him escape!"

"I opine he is gone already," said Siroc, placidly. "While you an' me was a-tearin' each other like Kilkenny cats he has folded his tent and galloped away like an Arabian. Mebbe it is jest as wal, fur ef I had got my hands on him I should hev be'n tempted ter lay him out in my scientific way. Let him slide!"

The Skull-Cracker was as calm as if nothing unpleasant had occurred, but Kit was chagrined. He had been worsted in the struggle, and besides, if he had succeeded in holding his man he would have discovered who he was—a secret Siroc still refused to divulge.

The latter had been waiting under the window for just such a possible emergency as had occurred, but the various men had become so mixed that he and Kit had fought by mistake while Sargent escaped.

In order to carry out their little plan of the

evening, Kit had seen Ethel Russell and asked her to change rooms with him, and thus it was that the plotter had found an able-bodied man opposed to him in place of a feeble girl, as he expected.

CHAPTER XI. THE MAD AXMAN.

THE following morning, the clerk of the Eagle Hotel had a series of surprises. Some of his guests did not appear promptly, and he went to call them. First he went to the room of a tall, clerical-looking gentleman who had arrived late at night.

When a prolonged knocking failed to arouse the occupant, he tried the door, and finding it unlocked, entered. On the bed lay a wig and dress-coat, but, otherwise, there was no sign of the clerical gentleman.

This was the room secured by Kit, and where Ethel had spent the night, after exchanging with her young ally; but as she had returned to her own chamber at break of day, the clerk was none the wiser.

Next, he went to the room of the fleshy gentleman, who had been pronounced a Denver banker, but only to meet with a fresh surprise.

The ponderous man had disappeared, leaving only his coat behind; but as this garment was very much padded, the sagacious clerk saw that something like one hundred pounds of the "Denver banker" must have been a fraud, and he decided that there was a mystery in the air.

He interviewed all the other guests, but as all professed ignorance, the poor clerk was left in a terrible state of mind. Two guests were unaccounted for, and if the landlord was to be believed, the clerk tore his hair out in handfuls when he reported the case.

In the mean while Sargent had reached his shanty, and had finished the night by sleeping as peacefully as though nothing had occurred out of the usual line.

Having decided that he had no cause for fear, he did not allow himself to lie awake for the sake of meditating.

When he arose in the morning he found Rufe Bonney already busy over breakfast, so he went outside to get a little fresh air.

He was pacing back and forth when he observed a piece of brown paper fluttering from a nail near the door, and the circumstance struck him as being so peculiar that he went forward to look at it more closely.

As he had suspected, there was writing upon it, and this is what he read:

"When a blizzard gits on a t'ar, it's a good idee ter crawl inter a hole. Ef you hear suthin' drop round in your vicinity afore long, don't you be s'prised. This hyar is ther toot o' a friend. Take heed!"

Sargent read without any change on his bland face, and then went inside.

"Rufus," said he, "have you been writing a letter?"

"Me? Thunderation! I never writ one in my life," Bonney truthfully replied.

"Ah! Well, listen to this," said the chief plotter, who then read the note. "What do you make of it?" he asked, in conclusion.

Bonney was frightened; there could be no doubt about that. His eyes had a wild gleam, and his face was unnaturally long.

"They're on our track!" he ejaculated.

Sargent smiled blandly.

"Don't be hasty, Rufus. Whom do you mean by 'they,' and why are they 'on our track?'"

"It's that affair at ther hotel—ther murder, I mean. They've found out all about it."

"Softly, Rufus. If they had found out all about it, our warning would have come in the shape o' a sheriff. Officers of the law don't send such letters as that."

"It may be a private party."

"It may be a new guide-book for the Mormons, but I think not," said Sargent composedly. "Be calm, Rufus; there is nothing to fear. Strange as it may seem to you, I believe this letter has no meaning at all; it is but the idle joke of some neighboring miner."

"Et's a kind I don't like!" growled Bonney, whose fears were abating. "It makes me feel as though a snake was coiling around my neck, wi' ther knot under ther left ear."

"Be calm, Rufus. Well, since breakfast is ready, we will eat, and then I want you to go over to the Den and see how Mr. Leadville Nick Leon spent the night. Perhaps Appleby has cut his head open with his ax. That giant is getting too cranky of late; he ain't safe; his mad spells occur too often. Why, the other night I actually dreamed that he attacked me."

David shivered a little, but on sitting down, ate with an excellent appetite.

Shortly after, Bonney went to what his superior had called the "Den," and what was in brief, the house where Leadville Leon had been confined. As the Boy Sport had suspected, he owed his captivity to Sargent. The latter had seen him with Ethel Russell and, naturally, concluded that he was not to be trusted.

Bonney soon reached the house and touched a secret bell which was used to summon Appleby when he was standing guard over prisoners.

Having done this, the rough fixed his gaze on a window of the second story.

"I'm mighty glad this hyar system is used," he muttered, as he watched. "I don't hanker ter go in among Sargent's devils. That mad giant fa'rly makes me shiver. Ugh! I don't want him arter me with his ax!"

His summons was repeated for the second time before there was any sign that the giant had heard. Then the window was pushed up and Appleby's head appeared.

As we have already seen, the man was never pleasant-looking, but on this occasion he looked so ferocious that Bonney began to shake in his boots. His face was twisted almost out of shape, his eyes gleamed more wildly than ever, and his bushy hair seemed to have received a fresh stirring-up.

"Crazy, by thunder!" gasped Bonney, reading him well.

The madman saw his visitor and his fury increased. One brawny arm appeared outside the window, holding his ax, and, waving it menacingly, he uttered a roar which made Bonney shake anew.

"Woof!"

It was the only sound which the tongueless giant could make, and even at that, there was little about it to remind one of a human being. It was at once strange and terrible.

Bonney wished to flee, but he paused long enough to make the signs by which he usually conversed with the man with the ax.

This time the effort was a failure, and the giant's novel weapon performed a circle in the air which caused Bonney to hastily desert the vicinity and dash away down the street.

"Blue blazes!" he thought, as he went, "Appleby is as crazy as a bed-bug, an' I wouldn't go in thar fur a million dollars. O' course Nick Leon is chopped all ter pieces. Pore young feller! I'm sorter sorry fur him, fur he war a smart young rooster."

Besides Bonney there was a man who watched this scene with interest. He stood in a doorway near at hand, and was very much surprised at sight of the mad axman, for, though he had never seen him before, he readily perceived that he was out of his head.

This watcher was Siroc, the Skull-Cracker.

Meanwhile Bonney hastened to Sargent and made his report. The blonde face of the chief plotter did not change.

"Doubtless you are right," he said, calmly. "If Appleby has taken a mad freak, of course he has not spared Nicholas. I am rather sorry, for if the young man had been docile and followed my teachings, he would have grown up a great man; but boys are always head-strong."

Mr. Sargent sighed as dolefully as though he had been a minister lamenting the wickedness of a backslider.

"It's rayther tough on Nick," said Bonney, slowly.

"He is out of pain now," was the oily reply.

Kit Allen awoke that morning prepared to continue his efforts in behalf of Ethel, but when he searched for Leadville Nick, that young man was nowhere to be found. He had an interview with the young girl and assured her she would be protected, and then once more he went to seek advice of Siroc, who was steadily assuming importance in his eyes.

In the middle of the forenoon, a team passed through Leadville's main street bearing a long, narrow box, and close behind came two other carriages, in the first of which sat Ethel Russell.

Even the rough miners took off their hats at the sight, for they knew it was the funeral of Thomas Neal, and there is an awful solemnity about a death at an assassin's hand which appeals strongly to the sympathies of all.

Siroc, in the meanwhile, was looking for Nicholas Leon, who had disappeared so strangely. The Skull-Cracker had felt sure of the Boy Sport's co-operation, and when he failed to appear, he began to strongly suspect that something was wrong.

Another disappointed man was Oakes, the detective, who still retained his character of a young man from the cattle-ranges. It will be remembered that he had an appointment with Leadville Leon for that forenoon, but the younger man did not keep it.

This threw Oakes into a subdued fury. He believed that Nick had taken advantage of the delay, and fled from the city, and he could not help feeling that he had been very stupid.

At the same time, he resolved to test the case thoroughly, and he sat down on a rock, resolved to wait until there could be no further doubt.

The minutes wore on, and Oakes became deep in thought. He had undertaken a case on which he hoped to build a reputation, and as the foundation was none too promising, he wished to make every bolt and brace tell.

He was aroused by a sound as of a heavy fall behind him, and he sprang quickly to his feet, and whirled on his heel.

Before him were two men, one standing and the other flat on his face. He who stood erect was Siroc, the Skull-Cracker.

"Your dream nigh about cost you dear," observed the latter, dryly, before Oakes could speak.

"What do you mean?"

"Wal, ef you will take a formal squint at that thar creetur', you will perceive that thar is a knife aside o' him. It ain't your fault that it ain't in your back. While you dreamed, he crept on you like a shadder o' a malignant natur'. He had his knife out, an' ready fur use; thar was murder in his heart, an' his footsteps was light. Your life-boat grazed the breakers which border ther dark river, then, pard."

Oakes could not doubt. The knife which lay beside the fallen man was an eloquent witness.

The detective drew his revolver and turned its muzzle downward.

"What now?" Siroc asked in surprise.

"I wish you to bind this fellow. In the mean while, I will menace him with my revolver, and see that he does not escape."

Siroc chuckled placidly.

"Never mind the binding. I opine he never'll make any more trouble. I hev laid him out in my scientific way."

So saying, the Skull-Cracker advanced and turned the fallen man upon his back. Oakes started back at the first glance.

"Dead!" he cried in amazement.

"Mesmerized," said Siroc, calmly.

"Did you do this?"

"What if I did?"

"Then I owe you a great gratitude."

"You are a detective, an' it ain't safe ter tell too much. You might arrest me."

"Rest assured," said Oakes, with energy.

"We are in Leadville, where men come and go strangely. You have penetrated my disguise, and I acknowledge that I am a detective; but I am not base enough to tell on the man who saved my life. This assassin is well put out of the way. You killed him, I take it?"

"I laid him out in my scientific way," said Siroc, placidly.

"Who was he?"

"That I don't know, but ef you ask *what* he was, I'll tell ye he war an assassin an' tough."

The detective examined the body and, finding no wound, asked in what way the "mesmerizer" had done his work, but Siroc was even less communicative than when with Leadville Leon and his friends.

Oakes was obliged to go without much information, and the two men soon separated.

Siroc went back to Kit Allen and they made a close canvass of the vicinity in search of Nick Leon, but he still remained mysteriously absent.

Afterward, they were sitting together in deep thought when Siroc suddenly sprung to his feet.

"Fool! fool! why didn't I think of it before?" he cried.

"Think of what?" Kit asked.

The Mesmerizer then told how, in dogging Bonney that morning, he had seen the strange scene at the "Den."

"I'll bet suthin' Nick is thar, an' we'll go an' see," he declared, arising.

He did not explain that, remembering the looks of Appleby, he had a deep-rooted fear for the safety of Nick.

CHAPTER XII.

NICK AND THE MAD AXMAN.

WE left Leadville Leon lying on the pile of old bed clothing in one corner of the prison-room of the "Den," with Appleby and the dog, Jip, for his jailer.

Both of these peculiar creatures preserved their old manner for some time. The dog had laid down and dropped his nose on his paws, but his eyes never closed and remained fixed closely on the prisoner.

Somehow, as he lay thus, he reminded Nick of a marksman taking aim, but his fancy was not calculated to bring a smile to his face. Jip was not a comical dog; he was at all times ugly, surly and pugnacious. He was a model watch-dog, for he never ceased to watch Nick.

One might almost have thought that Appleby had fallen into slumber, or that he had turned to stone. He remained on the stool where he had first sat down, his elbows on his knees, his hands crossed over the end of his ax-helve, his chin on his hands, his eyes staring steadily at vacancy.

If he was not a madman, Nick Leon believed he had never seen one.

At the end of, perhaps, three hours, the giant arose, took something from his pocket, and without looking at the prisoner, advanced to the wall.

Holding his ax in his left hand, he raised the right and Nick saw that he had a piece of chalk. What in the name of the wonderful was coming?

Appleby's hand began to move steadily. The wall was of dark-colored boards and, as every stroke of the chalk showed plainly, a distinct figure soon began to arise under his touch.

Leon grew interested and partially arose on his bed, while Jip, as though irresistibly impelled, turned his gaze from the prisoner to the figure on the wall.

This figure, at the end of ten minutes, was a perfect human skeleton, the fidelity of the drawing being really remarkable, and each chalky bone gleaming whitely on the dark ground-work.

Having finished, the artist stepped back and surveyed his work with the same impassive face he had worn from the first.

Thus, Leadville Leon, the madman, and the dog gazed at the skeleton figure as though fascinated.

For the former, at least, it did have a strange influence. The two jailers seemed so uncanny and unnatural that it needed only this finishing touch to swerve Nick's mind from its usual firm basis.

What would come next?

Appleby gave no sign to show whether his artistic work satisfied him, but, after a long and steady survey, went back to his old position on the stool, the dog resumed his former place and Leon dropped back on his couch.

He felt like a man reprieved, and yet, when he tired of looking at Appleby and Jip, and tried to turn his eyes away, his gaze invariably fell on the mimic skeleton. Then the figure would assume strange aspects. Sometimes, the fleshless jaws would grin at him in a horrible way, and, anon, they would seem to frown and the bony arms would wave menacingly.

All this, he knew, arose from nervous imaginings, but it was not until he turned his face to the wall that he could overcome the feeling.

Lying thus, the Boy Sport fell asleep before he suspected he had any inclination that way, and when he awoke the light of day was falling into his prison.

Both of his jailers were wide awake. Jip sat on his haunches, his disordered coat making him look like a carved hedgehog, but Appleby, ax in hand, was roving about the room.

Nick watched him in amazement. The giant seemed to be examining the prison, for ever and anon he paused and punched the walls reflectively with his knuckles, but the work was so without system that Nick more than half-suspected that he knew nothing of what he did.

Finally, he moved around to his skeleton-painting, and the sight seemed to impress him deeply. He stood for five minutes before it, making sweeping gestures, but not once did his set features change.

At that moment a bell jingled outside the door; Appleby aroused, started and looked toward the door, but made no movement. It sounded again and he straightened his figure, while a look of fury crept over his face. Something about the matter seemed to enrage him, but Nick could not imagine what.

A third time the bell tinkled, and then Appleby uttered a roar of rage. His face had grown furious, and raising his ax on high, he seemed about to make an attack on the door.

On second thought he changed his mind, produced his key, passed through and locked the door after him.

Impressed by the idea that there might be some hope of escape, the Boy Sport arose to his feet and strode toward the table. His idea was to place it beneath the window and try the bars before Appleby returned, but, as Jip saw that he was going to lay hands on it, he flew at him in such a furious way that Nick beat a retreat.

Then he thought of his stool, and as Jip allowed him to use it, he was enabled to try the bars, but they were fixed so firmly that he soon gave up the attempt.

"By Judas! I've got to take things as they

come!" he muttered, gloomily, as he sat down again.

Just then a tremendous racket reached his ears from outside the room and he at first thought some one had burst in the outer door, but maturer thought brought the more likely belief that the mad miner was "smashing up things" with his ax.

Leadville Nick grew decidedly uneasy. His original captor had said that Appleby frequently went completely crazy and chopped men with his ax—that he had killed several in that very room—and there could be no doubt but what he was getting into a dangerous mood.

What would be the result?

Since the Boy Sport had succeeded in releasing his hands, his prospects were a trifle brighter than before, but he could not but see that he would stand a very poor chance if the mad giant attacked him with his ax.

Suddenly the key clicked in the lock, and Appleby re-entered. It is no exaggeration to say that he came in like a hurricane. Dashing open the door, he bounded forward several feet, and then paused.

He seemed beset by a terrible rage, which made his whole form tremble. His fiery eyes rolled wildly in their sockets, and his ax was raised as though for instant destruction.

Plainly, he had gone completely mad.

Leadville Leon cowered back in his corner, as though to escape notice, but expecting an attack. He was very much alarmed, but his brave nature arose superior to all, and if Appleby attacked him, he did not intend to submit to a chopping without an effort at self-defense.

Gradually, the unnatural fury of the giant died away, and he went back to the door and locked it. Next, he started for his stool, but, chancing to perceive his skeleton in chalk, he stepped toward it and raised his ax on high.

Crash! and the keen weapon went through the board, cutting the skeleton head in twain.

His exploit seemed to please the madman. For the first time Leon saw him smile, and he broke into a series of chuckles; but the Boy Sport was so impressed by a belief that it was in this way that the axman would exult after chopping open a human head, that he found no encouragement in it.

Appleby, however, returned to his stool, sat down in his old position, while Jip, who seemed to feel his responsibility increasing, looked first at his master and then at Leadville Nick.

The latter was beginning to despair. Would help ever come? He had plenty of friends in Leadville, for the Boy Sport was a favorite, but it was not likely any of them knew of his whereabouts.

The case looked dark.

An hour passed. During this interval, Appleby had not stirred, but it seemed that ideas were working in his distorted mind.

Suddenly, he sprang up with such impetus that the table was knocked over and Jip uttered a dismal howl. Possibly, a conception of what was to come entered the brute's shaggy head.

All of the axman's fury had returned. His face moved convulsively and his eyes flashed. He made a sweeping stroke with his ax and sent

his stool flying to the further side of the room where it fell in two pieces.

"Woof!" roared the giant, waving his hand over his head.

Nick Leon drew a long breath. He felt that the crisis was at hand, that this paroxysm of rage would not pass as tamely as the other had done.

Sure enough the madman turned his eyes upon him and Nick saw the gloating look which crept over his face.

Once more he uttered his strange roar, and then, swinging his ax above his head, he started forward with Jip beside him. In his way the dog looked as ominous as his master; he was eager for the affray.

Like a gladiator Appleby strode forward, and the Boy Sport set his teeth and prepared for work—for a fight to save his life.

"Woof!" shouted the axman; and then having arrived at the proper point, he threw up his weapon and poised himself for the stroke.

The ax began to descend, but Leadville Nick, realizing his danger, suddenly stooped and made a dive for the mad miner's legs.

In selecting this mode of operation, he had taken the only one which promised success, and Appleby had unconsciously aided him by spreading his feet considerably.

Straight and true the Boy Sport made his dive and he went through the gap successfully, but one of his shoulders struck the man's leg so forcibly that the latter was tripped and he went clattering to the floor in company with his ax.

Nick easily gained his feet, and as the dog made a rush at him, he bestowed a kick under his jaw which made the animal turn a somersault and drop in the corner.

At that moment, however, the madman bounded to his feet, wild with rage.

CHAPTER XIII.

A STRUGGLE FOR LIFE.

THE Boy Sport was aware that he must now keep his wits well about him or the battle would soon be ended. He was much quicker than Appleby, but all the other chances were against him.

He paused in the middle of the room, and as the madman rushed toward him, dodged around the table and escaped another attack.

When the axman managed to check his speed, he turned about more slowly, and Nick saw that there was method in his madness; he realized that he had to deal with a wily foe and resolved to proceed accordingly.

He advanced toward the table, upon the further side of which stood the Boy Sport. The latter had unmasked two modes of defense; he must now think of something more.

Appleby advanced to the table and began to climb deliberately over it, cunning gleaming in his eyes; but Nick already had his plans laid.

Suddenly he darted from his position and catching up the remaining stool, turned at bay and launched it full at the madman's head.

His aim was true, remarkably true; and as the solid wood went crashing against the man's head, he reeled back and fell crashing to the floor, while his ax flew several feet away.

The chance was not neglected by Leadville Leon. He caught up the ax, and springing to the door, began to assail the lock with all his force. The ax was keen and it hit hard, but the wood was tough, and

before the way was clear, Appleby bounded to his feet and again advanced.

Three times Nick had foiled him, but no new trick was at hand, and he doubted his ability to conquer him, even with his ax as an ally.

While he hesitated, Jip, the dog, who had been very quiet since that kick under his jaw, took sudden courage and made a vicious attack on the Boy Sport's legs, and the latter, yielding to the impulse, sent out a sweeping blow which nearly beheaded Jip and cast his carcass at his master's feet.

The latter paused suddenly and looked down as though stupefied, and Nick did not neglect the chance.

Once more the ax rung on the door, and he could barely avoid a shout as the lock flew in pieces. He tore the door open and bounded through, but as he did so a wild roar and heavy tread behind him announced that Appleby was in motion.

Looking ahead he saw a stairway and made for it, but the long bounds of his pursuer were alarming. Down the steps went the Boy Sport, but Appleby was coming with utter recklessness and the fugitive saw that he was sure to be overtaken.

Once more his wits came to his aid, and dropping suddenly on his hands and knees, on one stair, he had the satisfaction the next moment of feeling the man's feet strike helplessly against him, and then, of hearing him go clattering down the stairs.

Nick was on his feet in a moment. Thus far his superior agility had saved him, but he had no desire to continue the unequal battle. He ran quickly up the few stairs he had before descended, and hastened to the nearest window.

One blow of the ax shivered the sash, and looking out, he saw the ground not more than twelve feet below. The leap was safe.

Still holding to his ax, he swung his legs over the sill, and then shot downward.

It was the happiest moment of his life. Once more he was free, beneath the sky, and in the pure air, and he was reasonably safe from the madman.

Surprised to find himself so near the center of the town, he merely paused for one glance, and then hastened away. He kept his ax for a hundred feet, and then, seeing no sign of pursuit, tossed it away.

Another hundred feet, and he met Kit Allen and Siroc, the Skull-Cracker, who were just proceeding to act on the latter's idea, and seek the Boy Sport.

It was a happy meeting all around, but when Siroc heard of the scenes at the "Den" his pugnacious spirit arose, and he requested to be led back where he could meet Appleby.

Remonstrances proved of no avail; he declared his ability to "lay him out in his scientific way," and they went to the house. Repeated rapping having no effect they went in at the window, but all search for the madman proved unavailing. He had either left the house or concealed himself in some secret place.

The searchers visited Nick's late prison-room and found the remains of Jip, but as the dog had never inspired deep love in the Boy Sport's heart, they left him where he had fallen, and went to a cabin which Siroc claimed as his for a talk.

"O' course," said the latter, "you mustn't go back to Dave Sargent. Let him think you're dead, ef he will, or ef Apple-blossom, tells his yarn be sure an' keep out o' his reach. 'Twon't be fur long; Dave will smell smoke purty soon, and thar'll be a crash round hyarabouts."

"Siroc," said Leadville Nick, earnestly, "I wish you would tell us your story. Who and what are you? That you are in some deep game I am sure, but I can't catch on to it."

"I'm a defender of innocence an' statootal rights, nothing more," said the Skull-Cracker, placidly. "I'm ord'narily a man o' peace, but when ther wicked take ter ther war-path, I usually drap around an' lay 'em out in my scientific way."

Nick made an impatient gesture.

"Have your own way," he said; "only if we are

to pull together, we ought to learn each other's stroke."

"I'm wal satisfied with my pards now."

"And we three shall pull through together?"

"Yas."

"And you, Kit?"

"I am with you."

"What d'ye think o' doin'?" Siroc asked, looking at Leadville Leon.

"I hope to deliver the assassin of Thomas Neal over to justice."

"You might implicate others," said the Mesmerizer, looking earnestly at the Boy Sport.

"So be it, then."

"Ef ther assassin had an ally, that thar party would be held blamable as an accessory before an' arter ther fact."

Nick understood the words and accompanying look. Siroc had before declared that he knew his (Nick's) share in the hotel tragedy, but, as Kit Allen did not, he was trying to warn the Boy Sport without betraying him to their friend.

"Whoever was in that plot," said Nick with emphasis, "deserves to be held blamable; and I, for one, will not spare them one iota."

"Right," added Kit; "they don't deserve it!"

Poor Nick winced at hearing these words, for Kit was his best friend; but he was resolved not to turn back or hesitate. Justice must be done, whoever suffered. One moment he wavered, as he thought of Ethel Russell, between whom and himself he must place an impassable barrier by a confession, but even that he would not allow to turn him from his duty.

"When can we strike?" he asked, looking meaningly at Siroc.

"Not yet—not yet; wait fur my word," said the Mesmerizer, hastily.

Thus it was settled, and without a suspicion on Kit's part that there was "talking across the board," Nick knew that Siroc had some good reason for wishing a delay, and he was willing to let him have it so.

After a proper amount of conversation, Nick's two companions went out and left him alone.

In one corner stood a rough bed, evidently the work of some hard-pushed carpenter, but as the bed-clothes were clean and wholesome, the Boy Sport decided to lie down for a while.

The exciting scenes through which he had passed, with the consequent strain on his nerves, had served to tire him, and it was pleasant to lie down where there was no danger.

Several minutes passed, and the rough walls of the shanty seemed to float in space. Nick knew he was falling asleep, but he felt no disposition to combat the feeling. A short nap would do him no harm.

His eyes closed and his breathing became heavy, but at the same time he was still conscious. A moment more and he would have passed the portals to dreamland, but suddenly his eyes flew wide open.

There had been a scraping sound under the bed, a slight stir of the garments under him, and he knew some living thing was under the bed. What was it?

Several theories flashed through his mind, but even then he did not forget his cunning. Plainly, if the object was a man, and an enemy, his touch on the bed had been an accident, and he would wait until he saw the result.

Consequently Nick continued to breathe as regularly and heavily as before.

Five minutes passed, and then there was a faint sound under the bed. The unknown was again in motion. Reassured he was resuming operations.

The Boy Sport smiled grimly and waited with his revolver ready for use. He was reluctant to shed blood, but if any one tried to molest him he meant to give little mercy.

He heard the creature underneath move toward

the foot of the bed inch by inch. His pace was snail-like, but it bespoke cunning and a fixed purpose.

An honest man would not act in such a manner.

With his revolver covering the point where the head would be pretty sure to appear, Nick waited, but never ceasing his deceptive breathing.

Something arose above the foreboard—human hair! Next came a forehead, and then a pair of eyes.

"Hands above your head!" shouted Nick, in triumph. "You've climbed the wrong tree—"

He paused abruptly as the man, after a frightened glance, ducked his head; and then, as the hair began to go out of sight, he pulled the trigger.

The report was quickly followed by a yell from the prowler, and in a moment more he bounded into view, fury in his evil face and a knife in his hand.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PET O' THE GUNNISON.

LEADVILLE LEON was rather surprised when this man bounded furiously toward him for he really held his life in his hands. He had barely to raise the hammer of his revolver and pull the trigger, and the man with the knife would go over the range.

Nick, however, did not hanker for blood, and, being an excellent shot, he at once formed a plan and put it in operation.

For the second time his revolver cracked, and then the knife of the ruffian went flying from his hand, that useful member became suddenly scarred, and its owner, having paused, began to curse.

"Bad luck for you, but it's your own fault," said the Boy Sport, quietly. "I might have killed you, as was my duty, but I only put a bullet through your hand. Bleeds some, I see."

The man stamped his foot angrily on the ground.

"Curse you! You've ruined me!" he cried.

"Nonsense! it will prove beneficial. As your bad blood runs out, you'll grow weaker, and that's what you need."

The fellow groaned dismally. He was a rough-and-ready "tough," but the flow of blood really disturbed him, and the fighting man of the West had rather have a hole in his side than in his right hand.

"Tell me why you were in this shanty, and I'll bind up your wound," continued Nick.

"I'm a homeless galoot an' I crawled under thar ter sleep."

"Ha, ha! Rather a weak fiction that. Say, what was Dave Sargent to pay you for this job?"

"Don't know any sech man," the tough answered, but Nick saw that he started.

"You had better, right away, if you want to hang on to the string when the kite goes up. Sargent hired you—or, maybe, he owns you, body and soul; I don't know which—and you think you ought to be faithful to your master. Wrong, my man, wrong. Sargent is a water-logged ship, and the sooner you desert him the better. Come, will you talk?"

"How kin I say what ain't so? I don't know no Sargent, an' I've told the hull truth."

"You have not. You were sent here to kill me. Still, I am not a hard man, and I'm going to tie you up."

Nick leaped from the bed and, very much to the surprise of the wounded man, proceeded to dress his injury as well as he was able. He was not in a very amiable mood, but he hoped to prevail on the fellow to confess.

"How do you feel now?" he asked.

"Better; I guess I'll go," was the reply.

"Don't think of it. I never allow myself to neglect a guest. We will smoke."

"But I don't want," protested the "tough."

"Won't you do it, just to oblige me?"

Nicholas proceeded to nonchalantly place cartridges in the empty chambers of his revolver, and the movement was so suggestive that the fellow hastily accepted the pipe.

"Smokin' always makes me sick," he growled,

"You should conquer such weakness. Here is a match, my dear sir. Fire up!"

Nick was resolved to keep the fellow until the return of Siroc, and as he saw that he did not want to smoke, he resolved that he *should* do so; and as a result the two pipes were soon going, and the smoke mingled as fraternally as though they were friends instead of foes.

The Boy Sport renewed his assault on the tough's reserve, and endeavored to extract a confession, but not for a moment would he admit that he had anything in the shape of a secret.

Half an hour passed. Nick Leon looked for Siroc, but he did not come. Another half-hour wore on; the scene did not change. The prisoner had begged for his liberty, but Nick was firm. He was resolved to keep him until the Skull-Cracker arrived.

The prolonged absence of the latter began to cause his ally some uneasiness. He went to the door often to look for him, but twilight and darkness came in order, and the scene had not changed.

Leadville Leon did not know what to do. His elder friend had directed him not to leave the shanty under any circumstances, and he was disposed to regard the advice as good, but he feared something had happened to his ally.

Darkness brought new complications, for there was nothing in the shanty with which to secure a light, and the two strange companions were obliged to sit in darkness.

Outside, Leadville was "waking up," and isolated yells were now and then borne to their ears, but Siroc still remained absent.

Leaving Leadville Leon for awhile, let us follow the fortunes of Kit Allen.

That young man went directly homeward after leaving his companions, and entered the house where he lodged. His first impression, on entering the house, was that all the people were away and the house without an occupant except himself, but on walking in he found a man in the sitting-room who seemed to be wholly at home.

He arose promptly when Kit entered.

"Hallo!" he said, familiarly. "I'm glad ter see ye, glad ter see anybody fur company. Hunter an' his wife hev gone out ter visit somebody that is sick."

Kit looked closely at the speaker. He had named the master of the place, but Kit had never before seen him at the house. To all appearances he was a miner of the better class, for he was respectably clad, but the younger man was not very favorably impressed.

"Is that so?" he said, slowly.

"Yes. Confounded mean time fur a person ter take sick. I ain't see'd Hunter fur a year or two, an' I reckoned on a quiet evenin'."

"So you are an old friend?" said Kit, sitting down.

"That's ther size on't. I war with Hunter when he fu'st came ter Colorado. I've swung hammer an' pick with him by turns. Ax him ef he knows Job Lyman. He'll say yes; oh! sart'in he will. Ax him who I be, an' he'll tell you I'm a bonanza on a welocipede an' ther Pet o' ther Gunnison. Hunter knows me, he does."

Kit was still inclined to regard his companion rather unfavorably, though he could not have given any particular reason for the feeling. In his manner he was like a good many other miners, and though not educated, he was far from being rough.

A little leading on brought him to tell of his coming to Hunter's house; how the carpenter and his wife had been called to the bedside of a sick neighbor, and how he had been directed to await their return.

"They described you, an' I knowed ye ther minute I sot eyes on ye," he added. "I reckon we'll be friends. I like yer figure-head, an' I'm squar' ef I'm anything. Otherwise they wouldn't have called me ther Pet o' ther Gunnison."

It might be as the man said, but somehow, Kit did

not like the "Pet," or feel satisfied with the situation. He had seen so much crookedness of late that he had little faith in strangers.

Half an hour passed, and darkness began to gather. Kit would have lit a lamp, but his companion suggested that they sit in the darkness for a while, and he let it go as he said.

The Pet of the Gunnison was in excellent spirits, and talked steadily, telling many incidents of the earliest days of Leadville and Deadwood.

Finally, as the darkness increased, Kit concluded to have a light, and at once put his idea in operation.

Turning back from his task, however, he had a disagreeable surprise. The Pet still kept his place, but another hand suddenly thrust a revolver almost into Kit's face, and a big man with a mask loomed up behind it.

"Go slow!" said the latter, sharply. "Keep your hands away from your weapons, or out go your windows!"

In Western language, the unknown "had the drop" on the youth, and he was wise enough not to attempt anything rash. The situation was not pleasant, but he must clearly make the most of it.

"What's all this fuss about?" he asked, coolly.

"Who are you, anyway?"

"They're friends o' mine," said the Pet, calmly, "an' though they've be'n a thunderin' long time a-comin', they're right welcome."

He had used the word "they" appropriately, for another masked man appeared beside the first, and Kit began to realize that he was in a trap.

"We've be'n delayed," said the man, with the revolver; "but we are around at last."

"I don't exactly understand," said Kit. "Who invited you here, and who are you, anyhow?"

"I ain't sure that we had any invite," acknowledged the masked man; "but we never stop fur sech trifles."

"Well, what do you want?"

"You're rushing business, I should say; but ef that's your way, I won't kick. Take a cheer at the table."

Kit promptly obeyed. He was far from being frightened or subdued, but with three men against him it was just as well to go with the current for a while.

The whole party sat down at the table, and the leader pushed toward Kit the writing-materials and paper which had previously been standing there.

"I want you ter write a letter fur me," he said.

"What is it?"

"Write ter Miss Ethel Russell tellin' her to come to this house."

"I shall do nothing of the kind," said Kit, promptly, for he was beginning to see what these men were.

"And why not?"

"Because she is safe where she is."

"You are mistaken. I am Edward Russell, her father, and I want to see her."

Kit burst into a laugh.

"Your statement is too flimsy, my dear sir. Do you think I am idiot enough to believe it?"

"It will be to your advantage to believe."

"Why so?"

"Because, young man, I hold all the good cards in this game. You are in my power, and your own treatment depends on your docility. Will you write?"

CHAPTER XV.

SIROC'S GENTLE WAY.

Kit had already gained a pretty clear idea of the situation. These men were Ethel Russell's enemies, and the letter they wished him to write was merely a decoy to lure her to the house. In some way they had obtained possession, and they intended to run a little game to suit themselves.

In this matter, however, he was resolved that they should not have his aid.

"You must excuse me," he said, calmly. "When I have any letters to write, I can do the work without aid, and I am willing others should do the same."

"Do you refuse to write?"

"I do."

"See here, young fellow, don't be a fool," advised the masked man, harshly. "We have the drop here and we are not to be played with. It will be *safer* for you to write."

"Do it," whispered the Pet of the Gunnison. "I hate ter see any trouble."

"Gentlemen," replied Kit, as calmly as ever, "you are only throwing away your time. I refuse to write the letter, or to aid in any way in whatever plot you have afoot. Mark that down and proceed accordingly."

"I say you *shall* write!" declared the masked leader, angrily. "I'll kill you if you don't."

"Save your breath; I shall *not* write," said the youth fearlessly.

The masked man introduced a few curses in parenthesis, as it were. Plainly he had counted on his plan as a sure thing, and it was decidedly bad to have it thus go to pieces.

Kit, on his part, finding himself less closely watched than before, had managed to work his revolver around where he could instantly seize and use it, and he intended to make a good fight, even against such odds, if he was forced to the wall.

Suddenly the masked leader again raised his revolver and pointed it at Kit's head.

"Boy," said he, savagely, "you have got to write that letter or die. Refuse, and I swear that I will put a bullet through your head."

The crisis was at hand; Kit recognized the fact very clearly. The unknown's voice was determined and his revolver did not waver a particle. He would undoubtedly do as he said.

Kit hesitated no longer. Within his reach was the one lamp by which the room was lighted, and with a quick sweep of his hand he dashed it from the table to the floor, where it broke into a dozen pieces and the room became plunged in darkness.

At almost the same instant the young man slipped from his chair to the floor, fearing that he would receive a revolver-shot, though nothing of the kind followed.

The masked leader soon aroused, however.

"Quick!" he cried; "seize the young hound. Don't let him escape. Catch him, and never mind if you put a knife into his ribs. I don't like his style."

Kit slipped quietly away from the table and toward a door which led into the hall, while at the same moment the trio of villains began rushing about in search of him.

He, however, reached the door in safety, opened it and darted out—straight into the arms of another man.

Kit quickly raised his revolver, but the words which followed reassured him.

"Easy, pard, easy! Let me go in an' I'll lay 'em out in my scientific way."

The voice was that of Siroc, the Mesmerizer, and Kit began to explain, but his ally waited for no words. With a cat-like step he glided into the room where the masked men were still rattling about.

Kit had no desire for a fight, but he would not let Siroc meet the three alone, and promptly followed. The room was still in darkness, but just as he passed the door there was a tremendous rattling of glass as a window went in pieces, and he was sure he saw some dark object travel this road.

Just beyond him sounded a confused scuffle, which grew gradually nearer the window, and then another dark *something* shot out.

Nothing was at all certain just then, but Kit was convinced that the Mesmerizer was busy, and he remained quiet while awaiting the result.

The room had suddenly become as silent as a grave. Even the beating of Kit's heart sounded

loud to him, as he strained his ears to catch a sound from some other source. There was a sort of fascination about the situation, though not of a pleasant nature, and he was so impressed by a realization of the fact that he might encounter a bowie knife that he settled down on the floor and waited, with his revolver ready for use.

A few minutes of silence followed, and then there was a sudden stir at the further end of the room, followed by a slight struggle, a laugh, and a remark in Siroc's well-known voice:

"I've got ye, neighbor! Ye may as wal hang up yer fiddle, for luck is dead ag'in' you."

"I surrender. Don't strike!" said a hasty voice.

"O' course ye surrender. No sensible man would do otherwise. I take it ye don't want ter be chewed up or mesmerized."

Confident that the battle was over, Kit raised his own voice.

"Do you want a light?" he asked.

"I opine we do; trot one in ef you will."

Kit hastened to an adjoining room, and securing a lamp, returned to find the Pet of the Gunnison standing humbly in Siroc's grasp.

"Thar's crookedness somewhar hyar!" said the latter, abruptly; but before he could say more, the Pet put out one hand deprecatingly.

"I war led inter it; twas ag'in' my scruples," he said, hastily.

"Who led you inter it?"

"Dave Sargent."

"I b'lieve ye; I smelt ther smoke afore I come hyar. What was you ter do?"

"Ther gal was ter be lured hyar and kidnapped. He thought she would be more likely ter come ter th's house, 'cause she knowed ther young feller was hyar; so he sent ther hunters away on a false track an' tried ter bait ther trap. Et didn't work."

The Pet spoke mournfully. He seemed to feel that it was a sad affliction to have the plan go to the dogs. Perhaps he lost his wages thereby.

"It wouldn't, anyway. I'm s'prised that Sargent is big enough fool ter expect it would. Ther gal has be'n lured away onc't, an' she won't come ag'in. Somebody tried ter get ther drop on me ter-night, an' I should say Sargent has all ther toughs o' Leadville enlisted under him. I reckon it is time ter trip him up. Say, my man, you have a beamin' face; be you willin' ter peach on ther boss?"

The Pet hesitated.

"I've told all I know," he said, finally.

"You'll sw'ar ter that much when ther pinch comes, will yer?"

"Yas."

"Then we will all sally forth ter cut an' slay. Mr. Dave Sargent must be trapped afore ther night grows old."

And the party prepared to leave the house.

That same evening, Oakes, the detective, who was still in his character of Chuzzlewit, the cowboy, was seated in a saloon, when he was approached by a stranger, who first sat down beside him, and then spoke in a cautious voice:

"I've got summut ter say ter yer."

"Ter me?" repeated Oakes in surprise, but carefully clinging to his assumed character.

"Yas; I kin give you vallyble information ef you will divide with me. I know you are a detective, and that you hanker ter find out who did ther kill-in' at ther Eagle Hotel. Wal, I kin put you in ther way."

"Who was it?" Oakes slowly asked.

"His name is Nick Leon, usually called ther Boy Sport, or Leadville Leon, or suthin' o' ther kind."

"Can you prove it?" Oakes eagerly asked.

"You bet I kin. Put him on trial an' I'll do it. Do you know ther record o' this youngster?"

"No."

"Wal, he's an' ole jail-bird, an' onc't he led a road-agent gang up nigh Deadwood. He's had a finger in more nor one crime."

"I have suspected him all along," said Oakes, with animation, "and I've worked against him, but he put an end to it all by disappearing."

"In plainer words, you showed your hand an' he hid. O' course he would do it."

The theory was so reasonable that the detective did not doubt.

"Can you find him now?" he asked.

"Yas, I kin."

"Lead me there and you shall be well paid."

"How much?"

"Well, I must see what I get out of the job first. There is no reward offered, you know."

The would-be informer, however, seemed to have no idea in the matter beyond making a few dollars of blood-money, and he wrangled over the matter until Oakes became angry. His obstinacy served to make the detective all the more in earnest, however, and he allowed himself to promise a considerable sum to be paid in cash as soon as the Boy Sport was secured.

The preliminaries having been thus arranged, Oakes expressed a desire to at once seize the accused, and the informer made no objection.

"Ther quicker it are did, ther quicker I finger ther gold," he said with a grin.

"Well, where is the young rascal?"

"Hid away in a house where he can't be easily found, but I'll lead you straight thar."

They left the house, and taking the street to the right, walked on rapidly for ten minutes, when they approached an old, but goodly-sized house, which stood somewhat back from the others.

"That thar is ther place," said the guide. "Arter twelve o'clock it's full o' cut-throats o' various kinds, but jest now we won't find more nor one man 'sides Nick."

The detective felt of his revolver.

"Lead on!" he tersely said.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE TEETH OF THE TIGER.

THE informer walked toward the door, but in such a hesitating way that Oakes feared he was going to abandon the work.

"Make haste," he said, firmly.

"See yer," said the guide abruptly, "couldn't you manage t-r get up a muss with Keno Karl an' put a bullet through him? He's bad, he is, an' ef he sees I've gone back on ther gang, he may take a bead on me."

"Have no fear," said Oakes. "I'm some on the shoot myself, and it won't be the first time I have invaded a thieves' den. If this Keno Karl raises on you, I'll drop him. Our cue is to go easy, at first, though. Just say to your doorkeeper that I'm Charles Chuzzlewit, a bad man from the ranges, and they'll swallow it. I'm made up for the occasion, you know."

The informer seemed reassured and led the way to the door. A peculiar rap soon brought a bullet-headed tough to view, and Oakes had no trouble in seeing that he was a thorough scamp. He rolled his eyes from the detective to the guide in an inquiring way, but the latter spoke quickly.

"Et is all right, Karl," he said. "This hyar is a cowboy from whar they make 'em wild, an' he is an anaconda on ther shoot. I know him an' goes him bail. You never had bluer blood in your house."

"Ef you answers fur him, come in, both on ye," was the reply, and the two entered and stood quietly while Keno Karl secured the door.

Oakes laid his hand on his revolver, for, though believing his guide was acting in good faith, he was not the man to move about with his eyes closed.

"Who's in ther crib, Karl?" continued his guide.

"Only one infant. Go up; you know ther way."

The porter settled down in his chair by the door, and Oakes was led up a flight of stairs, and to a room.

"Now," said his guide, "act nat'ral, an' all will be well. Leadville Nick is a keen 'un, an' ef you look suspicious, he'll tumble at fu'st sight. Swagger in, es though you owned ther ranch."

So saying, he pushed the door open and went in himself, with Oakes close at his heels. The latter's head was full of thoughts of triumph, and there seemed every reason to believe it was at hand.

He passed the doorway, but at that moment a hand darted out from each side, and two revolvers were thrust close to his temples.

"Surrender, or die!" said a sharp, keen voice, and it became very clear to Oakes that he was in a trap.

"Keep your hands from your weapons, or you die!" continued the same voice. "Move forward two paces!"

The detective obeyed the order, the door was closed behind him by his late guide, and then he who had spoken last burst into a laugh.

"Walked in just like an innocent baby, didn't you?" he asked. "I used to think you fellows of the detective line were sharp, but I've fooled so many of you, my faith is now small."

"I'm glad if I am not the only fool in the world," said Oakes, bitterly.

"Oh! you're not so very bad," said his late guide, "fur I played you sharp. When I haggled over my share of ther reward, et was as good as a recommendation o' my good faith."

He told the truth, but it was not much consolation for poor Oakes. He had walked into the trap like a blind man, and he was not only chagrined but somewhat troubled about the future.

His weapons were taken away from him, and then his captors gave him a seat at the table.

"I suppose you are all friends of Leadville Leon?" he said, looking at the guide.

"On ther contrary, we hev nothin' ter do with him, an' we know nothin' about him. We did know, though, that you had a sart'in idee in your head, an' we used it ter work ye over ter our will. As fur ther hotel murder, we know nothin' about that, either."

"I shall believe as much as I choose of this story, and no more," said Oakes, irritably.

"Quite right," replied the man who had addressed him when he first entered the room. "We don't care in the least what you think of this Leon."

"Then, why am I trapped?"

"Because you are a dangerous man. We don't want detectives nosing around in Leadville. You have got to leave or die."

"What if I don't do either?"

"There is no choice."

"And if I promise to leave, you will allow me to go?"

The man laughed.

"Not at present; we are not so foolish as that. We shall keep you here a week, after which, if you give your solemn promise, you may go in peace."

Oakes had no faith whatever in these words. He could not exactly see his way clear, but he felt that the man was lying, and had a vivid presentiment that, in any case, these men intended to kill him.

At this moment something led him to raise his eyes and look at the window directly in front of him, and behind his captors, and there he was amazed to see a face near the glass, on the outside.

Owing to the darkness, the view was not very clear, but in a moment more a hand arose and made what Oakes believed to be a gesture, warning him not to make any betraying sign; and then hand and face sunk from view.

The detective managed to control his face, and dropped his eyes without arousing the suspicion of the men. He replied to the last remark in what seemed a thoughtful way, but, really, it was merely an absent-minded one. All his thoughts were on the face at the window. Who had he seen, and what did the appearance presage?

Plainly he was not without friends in his trouble,

but there did not seem much hope that they were powerful ones. The face he had seen appeared to be that of a boy, and before he could bring help—

The detective suddenly caught his breath. An idea had come to him which at once startled and confused him. His view had been indistinct, but he believed it was Nicholas Leon he had seen.

If such was the case, what did it mean? Nick was on the scene as he had at first been told, but his part in the drama was slightly confusing. Was he a foe or a friend? If the latter, it was strange that he should be at the house as such when it had been said he was there as an enemy.

Silence fell between the quartette and several minutes passed. Oakes waited impatiently. The suspense was painful. Was he to be killed by these men, or was there a hope of rescue? Perhaps Nick Leon was not so bad as he seemed; perhaps he had gone for aid.

Now and then the detective stole a glance at the window, and, at last, he was rewarded by another sight of the face.

This time he looked more keenly. It was a beardless countenance, but it looked firm and resolute, and Oakes was more than ever persuaded that it was that of Leadville Leon.

The youth pressed his hand over his lips, and then made several motions, among which was the showing of a revolver, and Oakes was so sure that he read all correctly, that he nodded slightly.

Then the young man's hands dropped on the window and he seemed about to raise it. Oakes shivered; surely this could not be done undiscovered.

He was worrying himself needlessly, but his ally was only making sure that it was untastened.

Next, he raised his revolver and aimed straight toward the table. To the detective, it seemed as though the weapon covered his own person, but he had faith and did not stir.

Crack!

The report sounded and was so mingled with the crash of glass that a fearful racket was made. Nor was that all. The lamp went into scores of pieces, plunging the room into utter darkness.

Simultaneously the roughs sprung to their feet, but Oakes did not wait to learn their pleasure. Stooping, he darted through under the table and rushed toward the window.

He heard confused exclamations behind, but they only served to spur him on. He reached the wall and the window, aided by a faint light, and then his hand was seized by his ally.

"The window is raised; come down the ladder!" said a voice, tersely.

Oakes caught at the situation and began creeping over the sill, but when half-way a hand was laid on his shoulder by some one inside the room.

"Not yet, my fine fellow!" hissed a voice; but the mocking speech ended in the flash of a revolver so near the detective's head that he was almost blinded; and he grasp relaxed and the man fell back to the floor with a dull thud.

Oakes needed no inducement to hurry him down the ladder. His ally had retreated after firing the shot, and by prompt movements both soon reached the ground. Just then a revolver cracked twice at the window above, but the shots went wild and the fugitives beat a safe retreat.

Gaining the main street, Oakes soon caught a view of his companion's face and saw that it was indeed Leadville Leon.

"Young man," he said, putting out his hand, "you have saved my life."

"I saw you going into that den and suspected it was a trap, from the first," said the Boy Sport.

"They told me you was there."

"I? Then you wanted to see me."

"Yes"

"For what purpose?"

Oakes paused in some embarrassment. It was hard to tell the truth after Nick had just saved his life.

"You know we had an appointment," he finally said.

"Yes; one which I was unable to keep, for the same reason that you could not act your own pleasure when in that house. A certain man of my acquaintance spread a good many nets, for a certain lot of fish, but I doubt if he gets many of them."

CHAPTER XVII.

A WILD RIDE.

It was by a mere chance that the Boy Sport had been able to appear when so much needed by Oakes. It will be remembered that we left him at the shanty with his wounded prisoner, anxiously awaiting the return of Siroc; but time wore on and the Skull-Cracker continued absent until he became impatient and resolved to leave the place.

Accordingly, he tied his captive to the bed and sought the street just in time to see the detective being led into his trap. A suspicion of the truth at once came to the Boy Sport and he resolved to look into the matter, and from that resolve came the rescue we have already described.

"There is a good deal about this affair that I don't understand," said Oakes, as they walked along.

"It is rather a complicated case, on the whole, but it will soon be made plain. Some of the threads are in my hands, but I am bound by a promise not to tell anything until the proper time comes, and I must keep the pledge. Soon, however, the mask falls."

"Perhaps I am wrong, but I have suspected you know something of the hotel murder."

"If I do, I shall tell all. I don't want to shield any guilty party, but—Hullo! what's that? A fire, just ahead, sure as fate."

"Yes; and near the Eagle Hotel."

"By Judas! it is the hotel. It has been set on fire and I can guess by whom. Quick! we may be needed there!"

Leadville Leon broke into a run and his companion promptly followed, but the younger man increased his lead until Oakes lost sight of him in the crowd of miners who were hastening along on the same mission as themselves.

Nick Leon had but one thought in his mind as he ran; Ethel Russell was an inmate of the hotel, and, no matter what the risk, she must be saved.

"I aided to put her in her present trouble," the Boy Sport muttered, as he ran, "and if I can give my life for her now I will do it freely."

He sped forward at full speed, passing man after man of those who were moved by feelings less earnest than his own, but as he neared the building he saw that he would be too late to do any good.

From basement to roof, from end to end, the concern was wrapped in a red mantle, and the fiery sparks shot upward and floated off over the city like missives of wrath written in red.

Nick began pushing through the crowd, anxious to get to the front and learn the fate of the inmates, but he had not gone far when he met several men with a rude stretcher, upon which was a man, but his attention was called from all else to Siroc, as he saw that man walking beside it.

"Take him there and guard him as you would your life," he heard the Skull-Cracker say to one man.

Undoubtedly the words referred to him upon the stretcher, but Nick was not interested.

He sprang forward and caught Siroc's arm.

"Miss Russell!" he exclaimed; "where is she?"

"Soft, my boy, soft," the Mesmerizer replied. "We took her to one side, out o' ther rush, an' Kit Allen is lookin' arter her. We'll go thar now."

They went, but a most painful surprise was in store for them. When the spot was reached Kit was seen lying flat on the ground, and there was no sign of Ethel.

Siroc uttered a subdued roar.

"Tricked, by ther etarnal! ther durned reptyles hev got ther drop on us."

"Is she in the hands of Sargent?" Nick demanded, grasping the Mesmerizer's arm.

"I'm afeerd she is; but let us look ter this lad. Is he dead, or only swooned?"

He bent over Kit, and found that he had received a heavy blow on the head. It had bruised the skin somewhat, and produced unconsciousness, but when Siroc poured a little liquor down his throat his eyes opened, and he pluckily struggled to his feet.

"Ethel!" he exclaimed; "they have carried her off."

"Who?"

"Men—roughs; I did not know them. Let us pursue. Hunter has horses in his stable, and we will appropriate them."

He started off without waiting for an answer, and the other two men followed. Only Siroc was sufficiently self-possessed to remark that they did not know where to search. Kit had seen that his assailants had horses, and by this he knew they intended to leave Leadville.

Hunter's house was reached just as that man and his wife returned from the bogus call for help sent them by the allies of the Gunnison Pet, and a little conversation put the would-be rescuers on the track.

Beyond a doubt, Hunter had met Ethel and her captors on the road, and he needed no urging to put his horses at their service.

"Take 'em an' ride ther durned critters down!" he emphatically said.

Nick, Kit and Siroc sprang into the saddle and rode off at a gallop.

"They have two miles ther lead; I reckon our chainces ain't big," said Siroc.

"Yet we have as good horseflesh beneath us as Leadville can boast," said Kit.

"And I can almost swear I know where they will head," added Leadville Leon.

"Then they're ours," was the grim reply.

Leadville was soon left behind, and they dashed out over the road at full speed. As they went, confidences were exchanged, and it seemed as though David Sargent had enlisted all the roughs of the city and tried to make a clean sweep. All his enemies, even to Oakes, had been menaced, and all that had escaped so well was owing to their own fighting abilities.

We left Kit and Siroc just as they were leaving Hunter's house with the Gunnison Pet in charge, and we need only add that they placed that festive person under lock and key just in time to hasten to the fire.

Of the men whom the Mesmerizer tossed out of the window, they found no sign.

With Nick at the head and the other two men close behind, the pursuers galloped along the road. They had some hope of overtaking the abductors, but if this could not be done, Nick was confident he could find them.

On the mountain-side, several miles away, was a cabin where the arch-plotter had a lair, to which he retired when any storm menaced him. As it was not likely he knew of Nick's escape from the hands of the mad axman, he would not, of course, expect to be followed by any one who knew of his refuge.

Despite their hopes of overtaking him, no such good fortune occurred. Several times they halted, and Nick, who had had experience in trailing, looked to see that they were still on the track.

The night had grown old when he pulled up his horse at the base of a low mountain, or more correctly a foot-hill of the main range.

"There," he said, "is the path which leads to the cabin of which I told you. Now for a last look to make sure whether he has gone there."

He dismounted and looked for "signs," and when he arose his face expressed his satisfaction.

"Beyond a doubt, he has gone to the cabin; the hoof-marks leave the road here."

"It may be a trick," said Kit.

"We will settle that by careful search, but I think all is as I prophesied. If Dave Sargent knew I was alive and well, he would not be so bold."

Outside of the road it was not so hard to find the tracks, for though they were on hard soil, there were no others with which to confuse them, and an up-turned piece of turf betrayed the passage of the iron hoofs.

Day was fast breaking, and by the time they had gone a mile all signs of night vanished.

"Now, then, we must be careful," said Leadville Leon. "On the whole, it would be as well to conceal our horses in these bushes, and go on afoot. Sargent may be sharp enough to throw out a sentinel or two."

The Boy Sport's manner was so convincing, that the others submitted without argument, and once more he led them forward. He chose the wildest and roughest road, and that was saying a good deal where all was of that nature; but with great skill led them forward, until, standing on a ledge, he pointed forward and said:

"Behold the cabin!"

It was there, sure enough, seeming on the mountain-side, almost like an eagle's nest on the side of a cliff.

"Smoke, too!" said Siroc, with interest.

"They are there, sure enough," added Kit.

"Some one is there," amended Nick. "Now, it will never do for us to march down to the door and call for admittance. Old Sargent is bland and soft in his way, even when he cuts a man's throat; but I can tell you, in all seriousness, that he knows very well how to do that same work. Should we approach the cabin openly, we would be shot down."

"Then, how are we to get at the dogs?" asked Kit.

"I have a plan, but, first, let us make sure that our game is there. I want to watch, so we will lie here for a while, and during the interval, I will tell you something of my past life. There has got to be a clean breast made of the whole business before long, and I may as well begin now.

"My father, a Virginian, by birth, as I am myself, was as honest a man as ever lived, but the civil war left him a beggar, and he then endured many years of poverty which deeply affected his pride.

"At last my mother died, and then father resolved to go to the great West and attempt to build anew. We came, and all went well for two years, when he died, leaving me friendless. I use the word advisedly, for I soon found that I *was* friendless. Father had left four or five thousand dollars, but his supposed friends absorbed every dollar and left me, a boy fifteen, without a penny.

"One man, who had presented himself as a heavy creditor, took me into his employment—he was a Denver banker—in a menial capacity, and there I remained for three years. Gradually, however, my mind strengthened with my years, and I began to suspect fraud. One evening I went to my employer and said: 'You have money belonging to my father; I give you five hours in which to refund, and if you refuse my offer, I shall take legal steps to-morrow.'

"He looked at me keenly, and then said: 'To-morrow, when the bank opens, you shall have two thousand dollars.' I went away, thinking I had gained a victory, but in less than three hours I was arrested. I had been outwitted; the schemer had seen that I was in earnest, had pretended to agree to gain time; and then he had me arrested for embezzlement."

Nick paused for a moment, breathing hard, but no one addressed him, and he soon went on.

"I was tried, convicted, sentenced and imprisoned; but no prison could keep me. I escaped, and, though hotly pursued, finally reached this mountain. Having thrown my enemies off my track, I wandered about until nearly starved, and then knocked at the door of yonder cabin for aid.

"There I met David Sargent. He gave me food,

shelter and clothing, and my heart was warm toward him until I learned what he was. It seems he thought me sharp and intelligent, and he aspired to make me a prince of rascals. He worked on my feelings, saying that my enemies were still on my track, for a time, and then, when he saw I was reckless enough, took me to Leadville, saying that my enemy had died, after confessing my innocence. Yet, I felt that all mankind were my enemies, and—"

CHAPTER XVIII.

CONCLUSION.

LEADVILLE LEON suddenly paused and extended his hand in the direction of the cabin, and looking down, his companions saw David Sargent. The man had emerged from the building and was standing near the door, as though drinking in the fresh air.

"Durn ther critter!" said Siroc. "Ef I could get at him I'd lay him out in my scientific way."

"He is a demon!" said Nick Leon. "You do not know how hard he has tried to make me a villain. Nor how well he has succeeded!" he added, in a lower voice.

"Don't you worry," said Siroc; "I reckon I kin make all ther crooked places straight, an' you shall see me do it. Jest wait—"

Nick put out his hand quickly.

"Ha! he walks away from the door. He is going for a stroll, and down the path up which he came. By my life, now is our chance! Follow me!"

The Boy Sport darted away at such speed that the others had difficulty in following, but by a rapid *detour* they succeeded in gaining the path ahead of Sargent, and then they prepared for work.

The arch plotter advanced with his hands crossed behind him and with a complacent look on his face, which was like that the reader may have seen on the visage of some great and good man who surveys his property or his work with a benign and complacent expression. Such was Sargent's look just then. Not a frown wrinkled his soft face.

The three allies had taken position by his path, with Nick the first in the line. The latter had crouched behind a rock ready to give his enemy an unpleasant surprise, and not at all particular if he damaged him somewhat.

On came Sargent in the same thoughtful manner, but as the rock was passed, Leadville Leon suddenly bent forward and seized the fellow by the ankle, and with one quick effort he pulled his feet out of place, and he went headlong to the ground.

It was a heavy shock on the whole, but Sargent was tough and would have speedily recovered from it had not the Boy Sport followed it up by leaping forward and dropping upon him to secure a better hold.

"Lie still, you dog!" he cried sharply. "We hold the drop, and mean to keep it."

"I opine we do," said Siroc, suddenly appearing, "and we mean ter do es my pard says. Lay still, or I'll fix you in my scientific way!"

Sargent's gaze flashed from one to another of his foes for a moment, and then a smile wrinkled his blonde face.

"Ha! ha! quite a joke, Nicholas!" he said.

"Et is a durnation funny joke," said Siroc, grimly. "I reckon we are as tickled as you be. I say, old scarecrow, you've come ter a turn in ther path, ain't yer, now?"

"I don't clearly understand," said Sargent blandly.

"You will clearly understand mighty quick ef you don't go slow," the Mesmerizer declared. "Your day o' tarnal mischief is over, an' we rake in ther stakes. You hear me when I shout?"

"It is wholly unintelligible to me, sir, but—"

Sargent was interrupted as Siroc sprang to his feet suddenly. His young friends, watching closely saw his arm go back and forward like a flash, some thing seemed to shoot from his hand, and then a heavy object came crashing down in their midst.

Leadville Leon looked in surprise and recognized Rufe Bonney. He turned his revolver upon him, but Siroc smiled placidly.

"No need o' that, pard. I've laid him out in my scientific way, an' onless he's got a durned tough head, he will never go on the war-path again."

Comprehending at once, Nick made a hasty examination.

"You have failed for once Siroc," he said. "The fellow is insensible, but not dead."

"I didn't hev a fair chance at him, but it is all one. What we want is ter make ther king-pin talk. Dave Sargent, is Ethel Russell in that cabin?"

"No."

"You're another," said Siroc, calmly. "Now, I want you to do two things. First, call her out an' keep your cut-throats away; secondly, confess that you hev no holt on Edward Russell."

"Are you mad?" asked Sargent, with assumed surprise.

"Yas, mad enough to mesmerize you ef you don't talk."

"Since I have nothing to say, I shall not talk," was the firm assertion.

Siroc leaped forward and placed his knife at the plotter's throat.

"Confess!" he hissed; "confess, or, by my life, I'll drive this weapon home!"

For the first time in his life, Leadville Leon saw the villain turn pale, but the expression on Siroc's face was enough to alarm the bravest of men.

"I tell you, I know nothing—"

"Liar! I am in 'arnest, mightily in 'arnest. Talk, an' speak true. Is Edward Russell innocent?"

"Yes, yes!" gasped Sargent.

"Do you know anything against him?"

"No."

"Is he innocent of the Denver murder?"

"Yes."

"Will you swear it?"

"I will; I do."

"Who's in ther cabin wi h Ethel?"

"One man, only."

"Only one?"

"That's all."

"Good! you've saved yer life, or got a reprieve, an' now ter test your words. Stay byar, boys, while I go ter ther cabin, an' don't ye let this critter get away. His official statement is wo'th havin', though not 'zactly necessary. Stay here!"

The Skull-Cracker hurried away before they could speak, and then they allowed Sargent to arise and sit on the rock, but at all times kept him covered with their revolvers.

In the midst of the pause there was a sudden crashing behind Sargent, a wild roar, and out of the bushes bounded a terrible figure—that of a man of gigantic size and a wild appearance—and in whose hands was a gleaming ax.

Leadville Leon recognized the Mad Miner and raised his revolver to a level with the brawny breast, but Sargent sprung up with a frenzied air and brought his own person into the way.

The plotter saw Appleby and realized his peril, but his limbs refused to bear him away and in a moment more the keen ax went through his head and he fell, cloven to the chin.

His dream was fulfilled.

With his fall the axman turned his burning eyes

on the young partners, but they began a brisk fire from their revolvers and he went down shot through and through, falling partially on his former employer.

Two dangerous men had died together.

The boys were still looking at the bodies when a shout sounded from the direction of the cabin and they looked around to see Siroc approaching, with Ethel, uninjured, by his side.

Half an hour later the quartette set out on the return to Leadville, having left the bodies in the cabin, and Bonney, who was likely to recover, in charge of the uninjured rough. It was not a matter of importance what became of them.

On the road Siroc explained away the mysteries of our story.

Sargent had indeed held a secret over Edward Russell similar to that he had over Nick, and it was this which made all the trouble; but Russell was in no way guilty of the Denver murder. It was Sargent who lured Ethel to Leadville, and he hoped to ruin the family and secure Russell's money, but the latter kept out of sight and let Siroc, who had once been his partner, manage affairs. How well he did this we have seen.

Best of all, it transpired that Thomas Neal had not been killed at the hotel. He had been badly wounded, but the sheriff took the case in hand and managed all. Neal's funeral was a sham; and it was he whom Nick saw on the litter at the fire.

"As for my way o' mesmerizin'," said Siroc, in conclusion, "I have a lump of lead tied to a stout and very carefully made elastic. I throw out ther lead; it hits ther mark an' is jerked back ter me by ther elastic. That's all; a simple contrivance; but you've see'd how I kin lay 'em out in my scientific way."

They rode on toward Leadville, and, somehow, Kit Allen and Ethel began to ride side by side. Leadville Leon saw it, and a look of pain crossed his face, but it speedily vanished.

"I'm glad it is so," he said, softly. "When I yielded to Sargent I became a guilty person, and as I shall never be otherwise punished on earth, it is right that I should lose Ethel. Kit shall have her, and I wish them happiness. I'll seek my fortune further."

"Did you speak?" asked Siroc.

"I said you did not look like a dangerous man."

"I ain't, only ter toughs. Them's all I hit, but when I get arter them my mesmerism is strong."

And they rode on to Leadville.

We need only add that Edward Russell came out of a refuge where he had been all the while, that his daughter found no barrier in her path after Sargent died; and that now, bearing as she does the name of Mrs. Allen, she knows that Kit Siroc and her father are happy.

Sometimes they hear from the Boy Sport, who was once their ally, and they know only good of him who was once called Leadville Leon.

Oakes, the detective, decided that he could not win renown out of the case, and very wisely withdrew.

Of the Pet of the Gunnison and Rufe Bonney we have no further record.

THE END.

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